RPG REVIEW
Issue #2, December 2008

Pathfinder Beta ... Fantasy Australia ... James Flowers Interview ... Rolemaster-MERP and LoTR ... A Walk in The Shire (WH FRPG) ... White Hand Rising ... Rolemaster PBeMs ... Grey Ranks ... Dragon Warriors Review, Disease and PBeM... Hellboy II Review ... Mapping System... Virtual Combat System ... Sacred Time Carol ... Lord Orcus Listens! ... Industry News

Table of Contents

ADMINISTRIVIA

EDITORIAL

After almost 1,000 people getting a copy of the first issue of RPG Review (based on hits from unique IP address, not including known web-crawling engines), here we are at issue #2 and once again we're hoping to plot that difficult course between the old and the new, the mainstream and the alternative, support material, interviews and associated genre-material. It's a juggling act, to say the least.

This issue features three major orientations with a review of the next incarnation of the D&D 3.x series, the Pathfinder roleplaying game which is currently in a heavily play-tested beta edition. An associated setting article (also playtested, we may add) is *Ralis*, a fantasy Australia. We also include in this issue three articles for the newly re-released Dragon Warriors roleplaying game, including a review, a look at disease in DW by Wayne Imlach and notes from a DW PBEM. Notably this is the second PBeM article for this issue, as Luther Martin explains his thoughts on the use of Rolemaster as a PBeM system.

For the third component we have a retrospective of three articles based on Middle Earth, including a generic "Spirit of Middle Earth" article by Michael Cole, a review of MERP/Rolemaster and the LoTR RPG, an alternative setting for the beginning of the Fourth Age, and a series of Hobbit-based adventures for Warhammer FRP by James Haughten. The White Hand Rising article was originally submitted for Other Minds webzine, but after a promising first four issues, the fifth issue seems is now several weeks behind schedule.

Interestingly, one could also consider using *Grey Ranks*, the winner of the Diana Jones Award for 2008, as a Middle Earth game. As Tom Shipley's forward in A Tolkien Compass points out, a lot of the Lord of the Rings is thematically about the all-encompassing nature of totalitarian regimes - the books being written during and in the aftermath of the second world war. Along with the movie *Hellboy II* (again courtesy of Andrew Moshos), these form the "other" reviews in this issue. Appropriately for the season, Lord Orcus has asked for Christmas wishes and has received *plenty*. In a parallel reality, a certain Duck offers a fine tune for the Gloranthan Sacred Time.

An item of discussion that currently generates some noise is how the RPG hobby is going to manage during what is increasingly looking like a global recession in 2009 which could be tough for RPG publishers, and consumers will be quite discerning at what they spend their income on. On the other hand, this is an inexpensive hobby and it is quite possible that people will drift towards it as a result; a good set of core rules, a good setting and a couple of good scenario packs can keep a half-dozen people entertained for many, many evenings. Pressure, as they say, makes diamonds. Let's see some shine in 2009.

I am delighted to welcome Schmidt Jensen to RPG Review as our resident cartoonist. He has a wicked sense of humour and an uncanny ability to second-guess which articles I'm selecting for publication. Once again thanks go to Erica Hoehn for her tireless but appreciated efforts at proofreading. And send in those letters and articles!

Onwards,

Lev Lafayette; lev@rpgreview.net

Many a humanoid has asked me: How can I survive the financial crisis?

First, you must invest all your money in gold. Second, you must rub it into your soft underbelly. That will keep it safe, and protect you from nasty sharp arrows!

Ooh, you're so dirty. You *filthy* lucre!

OOOHH! YESSS!

PLATE MAIL

BOTTLES

Third: Always turn in your empties. Remember, every little bit counts!
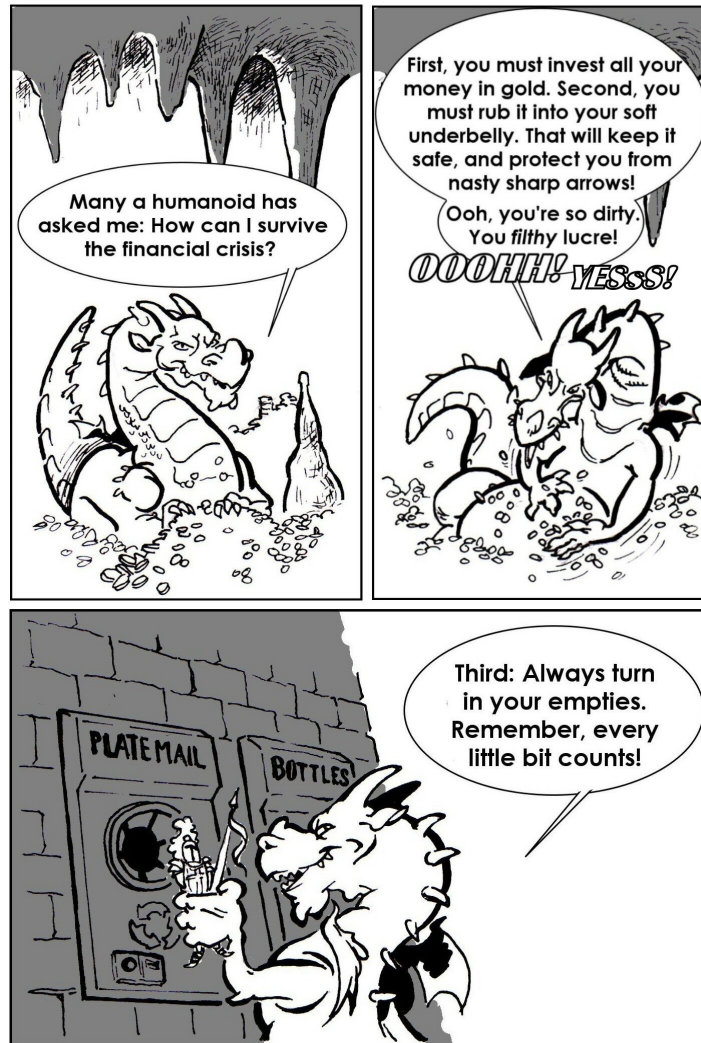
LETTERS

The review of Dungeons & Dragons 4th edition from the first issue of RPG Review was reprinted on RPG.net on October 3. 'Furst' responded with "This is probably the best review I read this year, good work!", which is high praise indeed. 'Cuneiform' described it as "thoughtful.. neutral and even-handed" whilst the systematic nature of the changes was perhaps underestimated. Portin Astorm claimed the review "tackled one of the most devisive, partisan producing products out there in RPG-Land with admirable neutrality." 'Mescalin described it as a good review, even though he was loving D&D 4e. 'Smascrns' particularly appreciated the link to CCGs rather than MMOs. 'Hogscape', from Perth, WA (another sandgroper!) keeps the bar high with the comment: "Yes, another outstanding review, but in fairness, only as good as all of Lev's other outstanding reviews". Yeah, like no pressure or anything ... Sheesh.

Appreciation from the French #1

Juste une ligne pour regretter de n'avoir pas "su" apprécier les règles de combat de DragonQuest, jeu que j'ai acheté dans sa prime version mais rapidement laissé de côté au profit d'autres dont je comprenais mieux le système.Et une autre pour dire combien j'apprécie ton article sur la conception des jeux de rôle. Bravo, Lev.

Régis Bacque, Ronchin, France

No really, we're a big hit there #2

Hey Lev,

I love your zine. It reminded me of the zines of yore, like Imazine (maybe less literary) or the best issues of PTGPTB (whose content was very heterogeneous).

Gianna Vacca, Cergy, France

Thanks - they're both journals that are worthy of note. PTGPTB is still going, albeit at a crawl these days, and of course Imazine - well, 1984 to 2002 was a pretty good run.

On The Other Side of the World... Beached As, Bro'!...

Hi Lev,

I'd like to say how delighted I was by the first issue of RPG Review. It's great to see a weighty and interesting new forum for talking about (and talking to) roleplaying games make its debut. The endless conversation of the internet is great but there is definitely a place for a collected chunk of thoughts and tools that drops into the scene in one hit, hopefully making some ripples.

Your editorial talked about your desire to find 'balance' and I think you did a great job of that in this issue, I particularly enjoyed the notes from designers working on new games, and (as an old D&D nerd of the highest order) the reimagined Demonweb. But the incredible interview with the Seagate Adventurer's Guild was the highlight for me - so good to have a look inside the unique environment of a longrunning game group, a creative microculture like nothing else I've ever encountered.

Your essay about learning from bad game design was intriguing. So much of the history of the hobby has, I think, proceeded along exactly these lines. So many published RPGs originated as attempts to find better ways to address problems in 1st ed AD&D - the whole idea of the 'fantasy heartbreaker' around games that hacked the rules, as well as games that hacked the setting such as Earthdawn or Talislanta. Add to that the enormous tradition of creating your own homebrewed application of the rules that was accepted and expected through the 70s, 80s, and 90s and it seems miraculous that the RPGs of the 00s have almost completely shaken off the heritage of distinctive rules in play at each table.

I wish RPG Review the best for its second and future issues. I will be watching it closely - may it prosper!

Morgan Davie
Gametime RPG groupblog
http://community.livejournal.com/gametime/

Hot Gossip : Industry News

by Wu Mingshi

Hosei bo Mr. Lev,

So you make to number twos, good for you. But look like you run out of space again, no House of Bloody in this issue. OK, next time, for sure?

Hey, guess what? Minshi get's fan mail too. That person say "Where you from Minsghi? I want 'phone number you?" That man damn powerful fool that doesn't know Singlish even when written proper. You know where 'Speak Good English' movement can do with self! Anyways, I have column to write and must not pay attentions to attractive man even if he send photo that leaves imagination almost nothing. But please feel free to send again, lah.

So special things that happen in this quartering you ask? Well, *Dragon Warriors*, that happen. Just go show, can give old dog new spots, la? Hey, and what happen to Tolkien gaming 'zine called *Other Minds*? Four good issues, now very late with issue five. Is going same way as *Other Hands*? No fear, *Hall of Fire* still running! And *Mouse Guard*, now that's a good one. Maybe crossover with *Bunnies & Burrows* one day?

Eric Gibson is now not selling West End Games! You read in last issue wrong. Well, you read right, Eric maybe change mind. Trying hard to do refunds for *Septimus*, and arranging OpenD6 with free download. Fans and publishers will be able to buy shares - even with voting, but not like Singapore style! This will publicly owned by gamers.

Strange news at Palladium. So what else is news? Palladium have new game coming called Dead Reign, a zombie game. Minsghi like zombie games, and zombie movies and say everyone should watch Joe Dante's *Homecoming*. So two young freelancers, Josh Hilden and Joshua Sanford write game, and big Kevin rewrites it and doesn't even give co-author credit. Mingshi shakes her head in wonder and exclaims Kev man has powerful eye-power.

Big news at Wizards, they do massive lay-out in August. Some big names disappear from payroll, like Randy Buehler, VP of Digital Gaming, Stacey Longstreet, Senior Art Director, David Noonan, Designer and Podcast cohost, and *Johnathan Tweet!* Monte Cook say that WoTC "not only doesn't value experience, it avoids it ... there's a real danger of losing continuity with these kinds of layoffs". You speak true Monte, and not just first time! Minshi also hear that Johnathan not unhappy with severance pay and time off. Happy holidays Mr. Tweet!

OK, so Minshi is happy bubble girl. But sometimes I sad too, and special sadness this time for family of Andy Matthews, Art Director of Hero Games who recently find mortal coil in heart attack. Read many comments say "kind", "talented", "a true friend". You know people like that, la? We need more of them.

Peace out.

Mingshi! xxx
mingshi@rpgreview.net

Pathfinder Beta Review

by Lev Lafayette

Pathfinder is a direct descendant of D&D v3.5 and ensures backwards-compatibility with that system, making use of the Open Gaming License which D&D 3.x and the d20 supplements were published under. The Beta version of the Pathfinder RPG received the gold ENnie award for "best free product or web enhancement" in 2008; it is a near-complete game system, albeit still rough at the edges, offered freely and with what is the largest open playtest known. In their initial announcement, the design goals were pretty much motherhood statements; compatibility with the 3.5 ruleset, more options, and game improvements. The lead designer Jason Bulham, doesn't exactly have an extensive list of design credits to his name (although managing editor of *Dragon* magazine does stand out), and Monte Cook is listed as the design consultant.

Whilst freely available for download from Paizo (http://paizo.com/), a print version is also available: It's big, some 406 pages, or 410 in the PDF version. It's heavy with the pages on gloss paper and full colour artl, sans serif font, two column throughout. There's a table of contents for the 17 chapter headings , no index to speak of, although there is an extensive glossary with excellent "spot rules". The layout is clean, the artwork of acceptable to good quality, and the writing is also clear, somewhat unexpected for an pre-edition of the game. Scattered throughout the text is a number of "Designer's Notes", providing explanation for particular feature and especially those that are different to the 3.5 rules.

Character generation is random or point-buy with the classic six stats which roll off the tongue of every D&D gamer; Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Dexterity, Constitution, Charisma. There is a +/- 1 modifier for every two points above the 10-11 range and bonus spells for high scores. The classic seven races are available (Dwarf, Halfling, Elf, Human, Gnome, Half-Orc, Half-Elf) which come with a clear explanation of their various racial abilities and with greater balance between the races, although the +2 Wisdom bonus for Half-Orcs strikes as an oddity. Alignment is still along the Lawful - Neutral - Chaotic and Good - Neutral - Evil dimensions. Favoured classes give +1 hit point or +1 skill point per level instead of the confusing XP/multiclass modifications. Three rates of experience point advancement are offered (slow, medium, fast) depending on the play-groups style.

The available character classes are a familiar Barbarian, Bard, Cleric, Druid, Fighter, Monk, Paladin, Ranger, Rogue, Sorcerer and Wizard. There are significant changes here as a key design imperative was to provide more options for each character class. Most characters receive special benefits in most levels now; there has been a concerted effort to reduce the number of "dead levels" where characters are biding time for the next bonus. Barbarians now get "rage points" rather than a number of rage's per day. The bard has a slightly improved hit die (yes, hit points per level are still random), Clerics now have 0-level at-will Orisons and gain extra domain powers with level advances whereas Druids gain a 'Nature Bond', which gives them access to one of more elemental Cleric domains. The Fighter remains a character class of simplicity and effectiveness. The major changes from D&D v3.5 is that they now also have a bonus to fear checks, armour and weapon usage. The Monk has been toned down a notch, but now also receives a *Ki* power pool beginning at fourth level for extraordinary feats. The Paladin receives a range of aura abilities which suit the idea of a charismatic leader. Rangers now have a favoured terrain (*DragonQuest* players would have a slight chuckle at this "discovery" - they had it in 1980). The Rogue goes up a notch in hit points to d8, a far cry from the days of d4 for Thieves, and receive an additional range of "Rogue Talents" and less restrictions on their Sneak attack. The Sorcerer too gains a notch on hit points, to d6, and now has bloodlines which provide a package of powers, spells and feats. Finally, the wizard too gains hit points, also to d6, and gains an Arcane Bond with an object or animal and has School Powers, a optional area of specialisation.

Skill and skill resolution has been simplified somewhat. The enormous multiplier at first level has gone, meaning that character generation is a somewhat quicker. Classes gain a number of skill points per level from 2 (Cleric) to 8 (Rogue) plus INT modifier. Class skills now simply provide a +3 bonus to the normal ability check system which is still 1d20+ skill rank bonus + ability bonus. The highest possible rank bonus is equal to the total hit dice. There has been some

simplification to the number of skills (e.g., Balance, Jumping and Tumbling have all been rolled into Acrobatics; Listen, Spot, Search into Perception; Hide and Move Silently into Stealth; Decipher Script, Forgery, Speak Languages into Linguistics) which is welcome. There is a total of thirty six basic skills listed, and they are still differentiated between those which can be conducted untrained and those which cannot, some still have an armour check penalty, some of which you can "try again" and there is good detail on what constitutes target numbers for Difficulty Checks. There is no longer any option for "Taking 10" or "Taking 20", both of which should probably be re-introduced. There is a hefty list of Feats, taking up three pages (a fifty percent increase from D&D 3.5) which can be broken up as General Feats, Combat Feats, Item Creation Feats and Metamagic Feats. As per the previous edition, most of have certain prerequisites, either minimum ability scores, other Feats, or caster levels. Magic items, it should be noted, no longer cost XP to create which spellcasters will welcome; a career as an alchemist is now plausible! Cleave has been fairly reduced in power, now requiring a full round action.
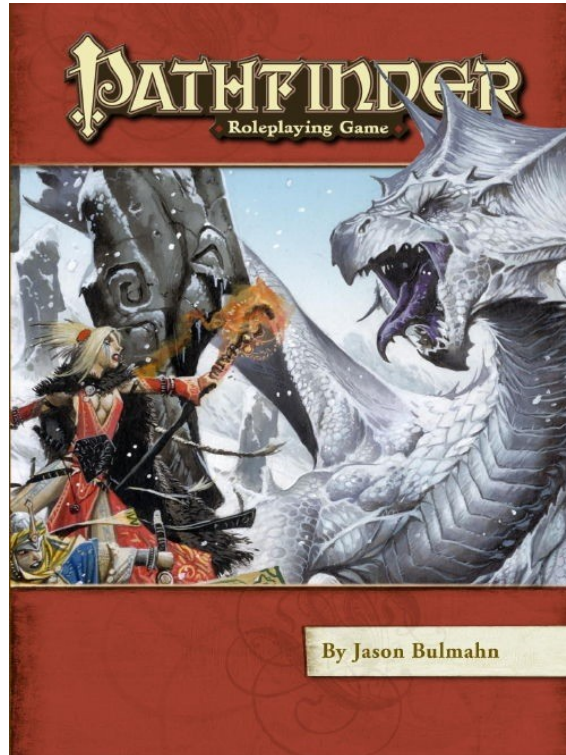
Equipment is similar to D&D 3.5 with a better and clearer explanation of size modifications; essentially a -2 penalty "to hit" for changes in size category and an equivalent modification in effort; the listed size categories are Tiny, Medium, and Large. Apart from that there a few obvious changes. Weapons still have a variable range for critical effect and different critical multipliers. Armour still provides a bonus to a character's armour class, comes with check penalties, maximum DEX bonuses (oddly, full plate is +1 and half-plate is +0) and a chance for arcane spell failure. Apart from that the offering is pretty much weapons, armour and adventuring gear. The following "Description" chapter however also provides detail on the effectiveness of various items of utility equipment, along with size modifiers.

Combat is generally the same; six second combat rounds, start with an Initiative roll, a DEX check, roll to hit on d20 plus bonuses, attempt to beat an opponents Armour Class, roll damage if successful, apply multiples if a critical is scored. Zero hit points equal unconsciousness, -10 or -CON (whichever is less) equals death. Saving throws are still based on Fortitude (CON), Reflex (DEX) and Will (Wisdom). A unified Combat Maneuver Bonus (base attack plus strength, plus special size modifier) is used for grapples, bull rush, overrun, trip and disarm attempts.

Magic is largely unchanged; a character selects a spells, concentrates using casting (making a check if injured or otherwise distracted), with the possibility of counterspells, notes concerning stacking (in general, no), and with magic defined by school (abjuration, conjuration, divination, evocation, illusion, necromancy, and transmutation) and with variable range, duration and verbal, somatic and material components. Major changes have been implemented to the Polymorph spell which was prone to variant interpretation and abuse. The spell has now been broken down into several other spells which are specific in their benefits. So no more Pun-Pun The Kobold, at least for the time being. Clerics can spontaneously cast *cure* or *inflict* spells in lieu of those already prepared, and Druids can do the same for *Nature's Ally*. *Find The Path* is undergoing substantial revisions, deemed to be too powerful for its level and suffering from "sucking the fun" out of the game. As per previous editions of the game, spell lists and descriptions make up a substantial portion of the rules; from page 171 to 290 of the 410 page PDF. Explained in the glossary, negative levels no longer require "unbuilding a character", rather it literally means gaining a negative level, a streamlined solution.

The final chapters refer to running the game and additional rules, and there is minimal differences here. The challenge rating system is slightly different to D&D 3.5, and there is more XP bonus for progressing the storyline rather than the martial defeat of opponents. To keep treasure in line, a recommended quantity of wealth per level is provided along with expected treasure for Challenge Rating. Extensive notes are provided for Monster design, although unlike a Monster Manual there are no actual creatures described in this publication. Environmental factors (i.e., dungeons, wilderness environs, urban areas) is also described in some detail, along with weather conditions, heat and cold effects, fire and drowing. A chapter of non-player character classes includes the Adept, Aristocrat, Commoner, Expert and Warrior. Again, like previous editions, the chapter on magic items takes up notable space, especially given the specifc descriptions provided and come in the usual flavours of weapons, armour, wands, staves and rods, potions, scrolls and various and many, many wondrous items.

Overall, Pathfinder is a solid, albeit cautious, production especially given that it has been in playtesting for nine months now, and the parent publication for five years. The changes that have been made to date are the most obvious rules that required fixing, which is not surprising that these crop up, given that d20/OGL is pretty rules-heavy system - they probably could be summarised on a few pages which does give pause for thought. Despite the fact the page count has been cut down from prior editions, there is still a need for a hefty red pen as the game does suffer somewhat from being wordy. I also hope they find a new name; "Pathfinder" is meaningless in the context of what the game is and what it is about. Even something a dry as 'OGL Fantasy 3.6' would be better. For what it is, and for its history, the designers can be quite pleased with their efforts so far.

Ralis: Fantasy Australia for Pathfinder

by Torquil Gault and Lev Lafayette with Michael Cole, Rodney Brown, Les Mallett, and Wayne Tufek

It began with a desire to play D&D but without a game world. A Jacaranda School Atlas lay nearby. Concentrating on Australia, it had plenty of maps, distances, weather patterns, names of towns and cities. From their the setting grew a life of its own and, through the wonder that is co-operative story-telling the world became *Ralis*. Does this have anything to do with the Crown Prince of the Zora people from Zelda? Honestly, it probably had more to do with Rålambshovsparken, pronounced "Ralis" in Stockholm's local dialect, Stockholmska. Or even the left-wing military stronghold of the Portuguese rebellion of 1974-75. But read on...

Ralis has a *similar* lay of the land as the real-world Australia. It has *similar* weather patterns, it has a *similar* landscape, it has the same creepy-crawlers, *similar* population centres (significantly reduced in size, of course), a *similar* history and, as a result, - surprise! - similar problems.

Ralis was originally inhabited by dark-skinned people who retained a hunter-gatherer lifestyle for many thousands of years. As nature worshipers of some significant magical ability, they have learned from and enchanted many of the megafauna and ensured that they are not hunted to extinction. This megafauna includes giant wombats, which weighed up to two tonne (often used as slow riding animals), giant kangaroos (up to 10 feet in height, over two hundred kilogrammes in weight), dropbears (a sort of cross between a massive, fifty-kilogramme, koala and a Tasmanian devil), tree-dwelling marsupial lions, carnivorous kangaroos, giant echindas that fire spikes, an intelligent species of possum, giant snakes, giant spiders, and, of course, many wryms and dragons of which the Great Rainbow Wyrm is most well-known to Orcs and Elves.

Over time however, two orientations developed; those who wanted to exploit the natural environment and those who wanted to work in harmony with it. They became, respectively, known as Orcs and Elves, both ancient fey races. The two people are roughly equal in number, split into some five hundred different tribes of roughly five hundred individuals each, and each with their own language and knowledge of at least one neighbour. Use Pathfinder's Half-Orcs to represent Ralis Orcs. Use +2 Strength, +2 Constitution, -2 Charisma. Favoured class remains Barbarian or Druid. All other information remains the same. Use Pathfinder's Elves to represent Ralis Elves. Use +2 Wisdom, +2 Dexterity, -2 Strength. Favoured class is Druid or Bard. The physical difference between Orcs and Elves is significantly reduced.

Some three hundred years ago, Zeeland explorers and worshippers of Nehalennia were the first from Europa to discover Ralis. However, eventually settlement was established by the men of Albion who wanted a distant penal colony and thus they established themselves in several key locations around the island continent, including Sidley, Bane, Born, Laide, Bart, Perf, and Broom. A massive group of guild mages and clerics of the Albion High Church engaged in a massive ritual after the initial settlements, and created the Barrier Mountains protecting the eastern seaboard from Orcs, Elves and beasts from the wild. Whilst the main human settlements are Born and Sidley, both with over thirty-thousand people, the lands around Bane are notorious for small communities of migrant barbarians, Perf is a fortified town, Broom has been taken over by pirates, Bart is a tiny port on the southern isle, and Laide is known as a centre for art and culture. Each has their own High Lord which governs over the regional colonies on behalf of the King of Albion.

Along with humans, the settlers (both free and convict) came with Gnomes, Halflings and Dwarves; use the standard Pathfinder rules for these races. The Gnomes and Halflings have proven to be excellent farmer settlers, whereas the Dwarves have made use of the ample mineral deposits in the land. All speak what is now the Common tongue. Many of the convict settlers follow the Old Church, rather than the High Albion Church. The Old Church is barely tolerated by the more powerful High Church and is often considered a hot-bed of sedition. Both the Old Church and the High Albion Church are monotheistic (indeed, in general it seems to be the same Supreme Being) with various Saints handling the different Domains.

Some of this seditious activity can be found in the Guilds, which play a big role in the life of people and politics in Albion, as one craft attempts to get the better of another, alliances are established, and the Lords incite bickering among the different groups. Guildhouses can be found in every major town and village throughout the land and for a minimal fee, provide cheap lodgings, food, and contacts through Guild Public Houses. Whilst the first Ralis Guild was nominally established under a famous tree outside of Bane, they are strongest in Born where the massive Guild Hall dominates the town.

Roleplaying challenges and themes are readily available in Ralis. For wilderness environs, there is many and varied myths of legends of the Elves and Orcs to involve oneself in, their internal conflicts, and an exotic array beasts and especially dragons. In these areas metal working is almost completely unknown and deadly heat and dryness is also a significant problem. There are rumours of renegade Europans seeking slaves from these lands as well; there's also tales of precursor settlements from the distant past. For rural encounters the numerous battles from the expanding human population and their allies against Elvish and Orcish traditional lands is an obvious narrative, especially as the indigenous people will make ample use of the Druidic magics which is almost completely unknown to the Human settlers. The rural regions can also provide opportunities for a settlement narrative of communities on the frontier; or desperate convict bushrangers who have escaped the claws of "justice". In urban environments there is an incredible array of factional politics within the Guilds, the intrigue of the Lords, and the distant possibility of federation, or even - most seditiously! - breaking away from the rule of the High King of Albion.

Making use of modified characters, stories and devices from Australian mythology and history is encouraged. Like any other place in the world with a little bit of elaboration, unusual individuals, events and ideas can take on a fantastic element with a little work. Some of the stories from other supplements, such as Call of Cthulhu's *Terror Australis*, or AD&D2e's Dark Sun series can also be used as a useful source of ideas.

A *thylacoleo* or marsupial lion. Image by Arthur Weasley (CC)

Interview With James Flowers

Q: How did you first get into roleplaying games? Which ones and what kept you involved?

A: The seminal question! "How did you become addicted to pen-and-paper roleplaying games?" *grin* I started fairly young, a strapping young lad of eleven years (I'm 43 now, so the math should be easy), seduced by the lure of a new form of entertainment called Dungeons & Dragons. After a short-lived period as a novice DM -- we soon got tired of our adventurers facing "orcs armed with +1 swords that only orcs can use" (so that the adventurers could be hit on a 20 on the d20) -- I got engrossed in Chivalry & Sorcery, which the grownup members of the local wargaming club played, and soon moved onto Runequest and Tunnels & Trolls. I still have the original dice-based "roll-your-own dungeon" rules for T&T, which I typed up and put on the web a few years ago.

From this start, myself and my friends were hooked, and we spent a lot of time playing roleplaying games of as many types as we could get our hands on. Anything and everything, really. Games from FGU were played heavily, along with Chaosium, ICE, and many others. Probably the games we played the least were D&D and its various incarnations (AD&D, OD&D, etc.) and the White Wolf games.

Homework suffered, of course. Looking back, I'm surprised how well most of us did at exam time. However, I do know that some of the skills I picked up from my hobby actually helped me further my career. The ability to be able to quickly peruse large amounts of written information and find specific information is not to be underestimated, especially in the era we live in now. Note, I'm not condoning roleplaying as a replacement to study and homework, but there are a number of soft skills that I think we, as roleplayers, take for granted that do have practical value in the non-gaming
world.

Things change, however, and over time (and marriages and children), our games settled down to just a few regulars: Earthdawn and MERP are the two mainstays for my group, although we still drag out the old games for a one-off every now and then. What keeps me involved at the moment, now that my own children are getting interested in gaming, is the promise of getting to do more roleplaying in the future.

Q: Redbrick is a relatively new company, only being established in 2003, yet it has already achieved some notable success with some good lines and excellent production quality. What's your secret? (OK, if you tell us it's not really a secret).

A: "Mr Bond, now you know the secret so I must kill you!" *evil laugh* The secret is the team dynamic. Getting that right, which can take a while, and we don't always get it right first-time, is the most important part. The Earthdawn Team has evolved over time, and are what I would call "matured"; Fading Suns is getting that mix right now, and I am confident we will hit 2009 with a good balance there; Age of Legend and Equinox are largely a combination of Earthdawn and Fading Suns Team members, but we have some new blood on deck to mix things up a bit; and Blue Planet is forthcoming. The principal remains the same: get a good team in place and the rest follows. And in this respect, there's not so much a secret formula, but a lot of luck.

We have been lucky to be able to work with FASA Corporation and Earthdawn, which has paid off in terms of our official status as custodians of that property. With Holistic Design and their Fading Suns property, we are privileged to be able to play with the talented Bill Bridges' and Andrew Greenberg's "baby" -- and we are looking forward to doing wonderful new things with this game line. Luck also led us to Blue Planet, which we all have massive respect for as a game line, and Jeff Barber from Biohazard has been an absolute pleasure to work with -- again, we have aspirations to take this game line to a new level. We have a great working relationship with all our master licensors, and we take the onus of managing their intellectual property "very seriously".

But the secret isn't all luck with game lines or finding the right team members. At the core, the company is very small, just a few people -- Carsten Damm, myself, my wife Kim Flowers, Kathy Schad, our Art Director, and Richard Vowles. The rest of the secret is hard work and a love for the games. It's part-time for everyone; and it's a volunteer effort from everyone. And, we all have strengths which we bring to the mix, in areas such as editing, continuity, game mechanics, layout, art, administration, project management, and so on. Everyone has pretty much "slotted" into a key role, and from there things have simply taken on an organic direction. From this, we work to do the best job that we can with the resources we have. And, we hope, we like to learn from any mistakes we make along the way so that we can continue to improve.

However, the really big secret is simple: it's the game fans. Game fans are your best friends and your worst enemies rolled into one. Before I get lynched, please let me qualify that. The fans of the game lines we manage are as passionate -- sometimes more passionate -- as we are. And they are quick to let us know when we have done good things and bad. For the good things, we are happy that we have achieved a job well done; for the bad things, we listen and, where we think it's warranted, we try to accommodate fan feedback. Because, at the end of the day, we are also fans of these games, and if our roles were reversed, we would be providing the same feedback. Obviously we have to be careful: there is a middle-ground in terms of what one should do, simply because you can't please everyone all of the time. However, we really do like to know what we are doing right and what we are doing wrong. There is no shame in this. We're human. That's the biggest secret of all. In this era of alternatives to pen-and-paper roleplaying, if you aren't producing products that genuinely engage and entertain your fans, then you really have to question what's the point of doing it.

I'm not sure if that answers the question. To me, personally, the people that I interact with on a day-to-day basis in this business are all like family. If we weren't, then it wouldn't be as much fun or as easy to do this. And, while it's not sunshine all of the time (we have our little feuds, as families do), at the end of the day, we all share a sense of pride when a new product is released. Because, we all published it. RedBrick is the vehicle; the people are the key.

Q: What about future plans for the company? Expansion of lines or consolidation of existing products? New means of distribution? Apropos to this, I notice that RedBrick is very open about its sales etc, which is quite refreshing given the amount of secrecy within the industry.

A: We haven't fully finalised our plans for 2009 and beyond, but the shipping price increases from our current print partner, Lulu, have catalysed moving some of our future plans forward. We are trialing new methods of printing and distribution, starting with new books, but if successful, spreading to all of our products. There is no good time to do this, so we are beginning this process in 2009. Details will become available over the next few months (some hints are already available in team member blog posts).

Product-wise, our main thrust for 2009 onwards are our core lines: we will be pushing to get Fading Suns and Blue Planet Third Edition out; Equinox, our "house" game, set in the Eighth World of FASA Corporation's cosmology, will be out; Age of Legend 4E, for D&D4E, will be making an appearance. And a number of Earthdawn supplements that are in varying stages of development will be completed and published. As always we look for opportunities to work with other properties that we think fit into RedBrick's business model.

Overall, we see the 2009/2010 period as a seminal one for the company. "Recession be damned; let the games flow!" Seriously, our business model to date has held up well in the last few years, which make up our sales period to date, and we hope to grow, not contract, throughout the next few years. Assuming we achieve our plans for 2009/2010, we will have a number of core product lines out in new editions. That alone is more than enough to keep us busy!

Q: At first glance, New Zealand would seem to be an unusual place for a gaming company to start out, let alone a successful one. Do you think there is a healthy New Zealand gaming scene?

A: Yes, I've had comments to that effect over the years. Geographically, New Zealand is remotely placed on the world map. However, our business model is digital, and our business tools are strongly grounded on using the Internet. In this respect, geography isn't so great a barrier. Our development teams are based all around the world: Denmark, Germany, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Scotland, Norway, France, and more. And, while in many cases, our team members have never met face-to-face, using tools like Skype breaks down the communication hurdles and keeps us all in touch in a "virtual" sense. I really don't think geography is a problem in the 21st century. And if RedBrick is seen as a poster-child for embracing this in the digital publishing arena, then I think we would all be very happy and proud.

In terms of the New Zealand gaming scene, ironically I'm not personally involved in it. We have at least one active forum (www.nzrag.com) which serves very well as a hub for New Zealand pen-and-paper roleplayers, and the LARP scene is very healthy. There are a number of clubs in the major cities, and several larger, by Kiwi standards, game conventions. So yes, I would say the scene is healthy. There is certainly a continued interest in pen-and-paper roleplaying games. Is it growing? I'm not sure, but it looks to not be shrinking, which is good.

Q: What do you see as the future of gaming? Will we be swamped by online computer-mediated roleplaying games? Or will there always be a place for tabletop RPGs?

A: I have dreams of retiring and playing pen-and-paper roleplaying games with my friends. "We play games in our youth, and weather the middle years knowing we can look forward to playing games again in our second childhood." *smile* I think the impact of what we are seeing with MMORPGS, like World of Warcraft, cannot be discounted. And really, these are still only the first generation of such games -- we will see increasingly "flexible" or "intricate" (choose which you will) games in the future. Game consoles are becoming more powerful, personal computers more inexpensive, internet access more prevalent, broadband speeds improving. All these things provide capable infrastructure to support more engaging forms of electronic entertainment. And seeing companies like WOTC actively embracing digital initiatives in conjunction with their pen-and-paper games, sends a clear message that we are getting closer to moving to online experiences for our hobby.

I have no personal preferences in this space. I enjoy World of Warcraft, Warhammer Online, and a number of other games. If I can get a comparable gaming experience to my pen-and-paper sessions using online toolsets, then why not embrace it and use it? For the record, I haven't yet attempted pen-and-paper roleplaying online; but I expect I will in the next year. Using tools to provide mapping, handle dice rolls, and so on is one thing; but being able to call up video sessions and talk in real-time to other players, seems to me to be nearly as natural as sitting around a table rolling dice. You can see and banter with other players, you still get the sense of "comradeship" that you get from playing the game; you still have a human GM running the session, and can throw the inspired elements into the adventure that computers cannot easily simulate. Other than requiring reasonable computer and internet access, it seems to be that this is the way things are heading.

Will there still be a place for tabletop RPGs in this world? Absolutely. Because even though you can have a "comparable" experience through using online toolsets, I don't believe you can fully simulate the "same" experience that you get spending person-to-person time in a world of your own collective making, killing things and taking their stuff, or whatever type of roll- or role-playing you enjoy. The virtual experience lacks a degree of spontaneity, but most of all, it lacks a sense of tangibility: there is comfort in gaming with friends, talking smack, throwing real dice on a table, and pushing little miniatures around a battle mat. And online, you generally can't all go out for pizza and beer together after the game. *grin*

In my opinion, online roleplaying games (MMORPG or GM-moderated pena-and-paper) provide a means for disparate groups of people to share an experience. I don't believe that the experience is as complete as interacting in person in close proximity; but it's probably close enough for most people, and that's where the middle-ground lies.

In closing. Thanks Lev for asking me these questions. If I haven't bored you, dear reader, to death, then thank you for your time also.

Should you wish to ask me more questions, please feel free to do so! You can contact me with personal enquiries at jflowers@redbrick.co.nz, or general RedBrick enquiries at info@redbrick.co.nz -- Carsten Damm or myself respond to general emails. And you are always welcome to visit us on our game forums! The Redbrick company web site, http://www.redbrick.co.nz, links through to our games and sub-sites.

A relaxed James Flowers from RedBrick games

The Spirit of Middle Earth: Roleplaying Games in the World of JRR Tolkien

By Michael Cole

The Allure of RPGs and Middle Earth

I can't remember if I was introduced to Role Playing Games first, or to the world of JRR Tolkien first, but they were pretty close, and a long time ago. I fell in love with both almost immediately, and have been ever since. The natural progression was setting RPGs in Middle Earth.

This has both advantages and disadvantages – the advantages are that a huge amount of the work is done for you in terms of setting up the world. Aside from the writings of Professor Tolkien, there is a large fan base of material out there, both professional and amateur. Most people, particularly those potential RPG players, have heard of and understand the works, which makes your job as a GM much easier, and it is an iconic setting in which to game. There are some drawbacks, however. The most important is that there is a certain canon to the environment, which means that you must limit yourself to gaming that makes sense given the source material. Middle Earth has a sort of magic to it – a sort of lustre that means that everyone who involves themselves in the world has a little bit of ownership of it. To take too many liberties with the source material would break that spell, and would cheapen the experience. As such, when setting an RPG in Middle Earth, certain ground rules should be adhered to – a baseline from which to expand based on your own imagination. What I am attempting to do here is to give my opinion on what constitutes that baseline.

Note that this article is not an attempt to describe exactly how Middle Earth should be – it is an attempt to show how Role Playing Games be played to both remain enjoyable, and to retail the flavour of the writings of Professor Tolkien. In order to run an RPG in Middle Earth, certain liberties must be taken with the Professor's work in order to allow an enjoyable experience for those participating, but those liberties should not cover destroying the basic fabric of the concepts within the books.

The Spirit of Tolkien -- *Or, the nature of the campaign.*

The most important concept is the spirit of the books themselves – this spirit needs to be captured; otherwise the adventure – no matter how closely it uses the maps and the languages – will simply not have the feel of Tolkien. Middle Earth is more than facts – it is a feeling.

The PCs are the Heroes

Whereas many RPG systems assume that the PCs will be motivated by the idea of "Kill monster, take treasure", the Middle Earth setting makes clear definitions about good and evil, and the assumption should be that the PCs will be motivated by more altruistic reasons than simple greed. There is always some reason for the adventure – some overriding arc that provides an impetus for the heroes to do what they do.

Sure, Bilbo was originally hired as a burglar, and behaved, some might say questionably, in some parts of the story, particularly in his efforts in the riddle game post the Professor's rewrite[1], but in the end, he willingly gave up his fourteenth share of the treasure in order to try to prevent a war. Sure, Boromir tried to get the ring from Frodo, but after realising what he had done, he gave his life to protect Merry and Pippin, and as he lay dying, he repented of what he

---

[1]   The Fellowship of he Ring, Prologue, "Of the Finding of the Ring" – The Riddles in the Dark chapter of *The Hobbit* was rewritten after Tolkien started work on the Lord of the Rings, in order to provide greater malevolence to the nature of the One Ring.

had done.

The game needs to have more to it than a simple smash and grab. This doesn't mean that gaining wealth cannot be part of a PC's nature, nor does it mean that all PCs must be Dudley Do-Right. PCs can and should have well-rounded character, and character flaws and colour are all part of that – take the elves of the House of Feanor for example – but when push comes to shove, they need to be at their core, at least partially altruistic. Adventures should be written with this in mind; the players should play with this in mind, and the game system and GM should reward this altruistic behaviour and not reward selfishness.

This was brought into clarity recently when I was reading some commercially published adventures, which went into details of the patron's – who was the main good guy – combat ability, his combat support, and what would happen if the PCs tried to attack or rob him, instead of accepting his commission. This should not need to occur – the players, and thus the PCs, should not even start thinking of doing that. If they do, then that would indicate a much deeper flaw in the campaign.

Unfortunately, I was not totally immune to this. I remember my first running of a campaign set in Middle Earth, which had the PCs all meeting in the Vodagarazun (an inn) in Esgaroth-upon-Long-Lake. PC talks to patron; patron is verbally dismissive of PC; player then says abruptly, "I cut off his arm."

Cue stunned silence. "What?"

Player continues, "I pick up my battle axe and cut off his arm."

Unfortunately then, I didn't know how to handle this – many people seem to think that participating in an RPG means that they can act as unethically as they wish, with no comeback, and unfortunately much of the common RPG material seems to accept this. How you handle it depends on the players and the game system[2], but it needs to be handled.

The Heroes are the Little Guys

Contrary to what some may think, the *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* are a paean to the little guys. Sure, they may move in exalted circles, but it is the little guys who make the difference, and are the true heroes in the story. Bilbo is the obvious example – he travelled with a Dwarven King, but in the end, it was his example that made the difference. Even in the Lord of the Rings, it is the hobbits that are the focus of the story. Aragorn, the nominal hero, is a mythic figure, far above the normal person. Even though they walk with a future King, an Elven Prince, and the son of the Steward of Gondor, it is the hobbits who provide the heroism of the story. It is they who take on the task of carrying the ring, and of going into he unknown. It is they who bring the Ents into the conflict, not through martial ability, but through their nature. It is they who strike the first blow against the Witch King in the battle on Pelenor Fields. And in the end, it is they who scour the Shire.

In the same way, the PCs in any adventure set in Middle Earth should also be "little guys". The PCs can be better that the average person – indeed, they should almost certainly be so – but in character, not in status. They can interact with the high and mighty, but they themselves should be more humble. Even in the Silmarillion, the heroes were the simple men, Beren and Turin, who struggled and finally came to their rewards, not the mighty elf-lords, who squandered what they had with their pettiness.

Regardless of the wishes of those who want to play an RPG in Middle Earth, Gandalf, Legolas and Aragorn are *not* player character material – they are the NPCs. You may need to overrule players who wish to play a character such as this, and inform them as to why; or better yet, why the game system won't allow this. The game system used should

---

2   Indeed, the Decipher "The Lord of the Rings Roleplaying Game" does this quite well, setting aside two pages to describe "The Quality of Heroes".

recognize this, in that starting PCs should not be superheroes, and should not progress upwards in ability as the game progresses such that they outgrow the environment. Life for the PCs should be a struggle, for which they persevere in.

The Little Guys Always Have Hope

Even though life may be a struggle, there always needs to be a light at the end of the tunnel – indeed, the recognition of that light is one of the things that makes the heroes, heroes. Tolkien's world is not a depressing one – even in the times of greatest pressing doom, there is always hope.

The PCs need to have victories, even if only small ones. They need to have some sort of life away from adventuring – family and friends, or even just a favourite pub. Everyone needs a *Green Dragon* – otherwise what are they fighting for?

The reason for the PCs being heroes should not for what they may achieve, but because of what they already have. They are not alone – they cannot be. They need to be placed in an environment that gives them a home. They may be many times out of their depth, but they must have allies – Tolkien's stories are full of unexpected hope arising when all seems lost, and the reason for that hope arising is because of the small deed that the heroes have accomplished. It is the efforts that the heroes make that are rewarded.

The obvious example is the arrival of the Eagles, almost continuously, as a Deux ex Machina. Throughout the stories, help arrives in unexpected ways – the Ride of the Rohirrim, the arrival of the Ships from the South – even smaller efforts such as Tom Cotton and his boys. Effectively, the PCs should always be able to find friends.
The world should never be portrayed as always dark – light always shines though. Middle Earth, even in the darkest hours of trouble, should never be played as a depressing place. Wonder, peace and enchantment must always be present, for it is this that is the core of the nature of Middle Earth.

> "... I name before you all Frodo of the Shire and Samwise his servant. And the bards and minstrels should give them new names: Bronwe athan Harthad and Harthad Uluithiad, Endurance beyond Hope and Hope Unquenchable."
> *The History of Middle-earth, vol. IX, Sauron Defeated: "Many Partings," p. 62*

The Spirit of the World -- *Or, the nature of the setting.*

Once we get past the overall spirit of the writings, we then move into the next layer – the world that Tolkien created. Here there are many things that could be noted, but rather than providing a detailed list of what Middle Earth entails, I thought I would just mention what seem to me to be the important concepts that make Middle Earth different from other gaming worlds. Here, we start to move from the generic to the specific.

The Familiar… -- *The basis of the world.*

The most important thing to remember about the world of Tolkien is that he was originally writing it as a sort of alternative history to our Earth – it was an attempt to create a mythology for Britain. As such, the world needs to contain a sense of familiarity for those who journey in it. All components of the world need to be based on similar components to that of our own. This applies even though Middle Earth is a fantasy world, with magic, divine intervention, strange creatures and substances such as Mithral and Sil.

Even with these differences, the players need to be able to draw parallels. All living creatures should still eat, breathe and go to the toilet – if they don't, then they are not living. All living creatures should have similar emotions to us too – fear, hunger, passion, even love. Certain races may be known for certain traits – the dwarves for steadfastness, the elves for insight, the orcs for bloodthirstiness, but even though these races may seem foreign to us, in their nature, individuals of those strange races should exercise these common emotions.

In a similar way, the physical nature of the world should be similar to our own. Rivers flow downwards, plants still grow upwards, and children still like candy. The world should enchant the players, not confuse them. Start with the basic nature of our own world, and then subtly add to it – don't radically change it.

…and the Foreign -- *What makes it special.*

The changes, though, are important, and also need to be reflected – otherwise not only would it not be Middle Earth but it would not be fantasy. The thing to be careful with is that the fantasy elements don't jar; they don't take over and drown everything else out. No powerful battle-mages living in small villages; no dragons living in the middle of civilisation; no weird and wonderful creatures without visible means of support – food etc. When players meet the fantasy elements of the story, they should still make sense.

The Sacred… -- *Religion and magic.*

This is one of the most essential things to get right – importing a system of magic or religion into Middle Earth that is not compatible with the vision of Tolkien is the best way to break the spell. The religious background of Middle Earth is extremely well spelt out, mainly in the Silmarillion. That does not mean that you cannot have different peoples worshiping non-standard gods or spirits, but it does mean that you cannot have non-standard gods or spirits. Do not import Greek or Norse mythology, regardless of how appealing they may be – Middle Earth is a special place and should be treated as such. It is not a blank canvas.

Priests, one of the standards in most RPGs, are likewise non-standard for Middle Earth. Personally, I would simply not allow the standard Priest archetype in Middle Earth, as no matter how you try and wedge it in, it will still grate. Shamans[3], healers, spirit-dancers, et cetera, sure. Bit no standard priestly-types – no one channelling power directly from a deity. You need to remember that Middle Earth is effectively monotheistic – there is Eru - God, and then there are the Ainu – angelic beings. There are no pantheons.

Likewise magic in Middle Earth has its own signature – it is subtle, rare and personal. I know that some have stated that no PCs in Middle Earth should have access to magic, as it is the domain of the Maiar – personally I disagree as Middle Earth without PC access to magic would be depressing, but whatever you decide, make it compatible with the setting. No fireballs, flame-strikes, earthquakes or ice storms. There are many other publications written on the nature of magic in Middle Earth, and I cannot cover the subject in depth here, but suffice to say, the choice of the magic system for use in Middle Earth will be one on the most crucial you must make.

…and Profane - *The nature of evil.*

These will probably be the most controversial comments I make here, but evil in the world of Tolkien is most definitely not one-dimensional. Tolkien was writing from a Catholic perspective, and his writings make clear that no one is intrinsically evil. Even Melkor and Sauron have reasons, misguided and wrong though they may be, for doing what they did.

> "To Melkor among the Ainur had been given the greatest gifts of power and knowledge, and … desire grew hot within him to bring into Being things of his own…"
> *The Silmarillion: "Ainulindalë" p. 16*

Melkor's sin was pride and impatience. He wanted to create, to be someone. He was the greatest but he wanted more. And then when Eru publicly rebuked him, "…Melkor was filled with shame, of which came secret anger." These are human frailties on display here – I have seen the exact same situations occur at work meetings – a combination of incompetent management and socially inept staff. The clear comment by Tolkien later in the same chapter is that Melkor "…feigned, even to himself at first, that he desired to … order all things for the good of the Children of

---

[3]   Not shamen. Oh, and a female Shaman is still a shaman, not a shawoman.

Ilúvatar…" There is no intrinsic evil here – from Letters #200, "…, Melkor, who ultimately became the **inevitable** Rebel and self-worshiper…" [my emphasis]

Likewise with Sauron, and this is spelt out in *Morgoth's Ring*, the cause of his slide towards evil was that, "it had been his virtue (and therefore also the cause of his fall ...) that he loved order and coordination, and disliked all confusion and wasteful friction." Sauron was drawn to Melkor though his desire to have order – even though he was originally a follower of Aulë, he wanted to guide (or control) the creation, and felt that Melkor was a better option. I would also mention here that Ossë also was for a time, a servant of Melkor, but with the intersession of Uinen, repented and was granted forgiveness by the Valar.

On a smaller scale, all intelligent life-forms should also have this personality to them. Tolkien did this particularly well with the orcs in the flight across the wold, and in the Tower of Cirith Ungol. Yes, we realise that they are a different species, but we can also empathise with their emotions, and thus make sense of their actions. We can even emphasise, and possibly even feel sympathy with Ungoliant after Melkor had her driven away by the Balrogs with their whips, after refusing to give her the Silmarils to slake her thirst.

You need to ensure that even in the actions of the players' enemies; they can be understood in some way. There needs to be a reason why people do bad stuff – there should be no irredeemably evil orc babies just waiting to be slaughtered by the closest paladin.

Likewise, the players should not be given carte blanche to do whatever they like, simply because they are supposed to be the good guys. Bad things are still bad things, regardless of who does them. Tolkien's books are full of examples of people doing wrong things for what they may think are the right reasons – Boromir is probably the most famous example. If the PCs take too many liberties with the freedom that they have, then make sure that they are held responsible.

The Spirit of the Game *Or, the nature of the adventure.*

Here we move into the most specific of the issues – the actual adventuring itself. This section is more a series of points on aspects that are common (or so it seems) in most RPGs, but tend to be anachronistic in a Middle-Earth setting. In many cases, these aspects will be given in a brief form, and are rather general.

Monsters

Obviously, other third-party adventures tend to make use of monsters that do not exist in Middle Earth canon literature. Whilst some of these creatures can certainly be integrated even though not specifically mentioned by Tolkien, wherever possible, these should be changed to reflect standard Middle Earth critters.

If you can base their existence from a "canon" creature, and their impact would be minor, and their non-mentioning by Tolkien explainable, then I see no reason why they shouldn't be used. Personally, I think that a small community of Lizard-Men would be acceptable. Much like hobbits, who were not widely known by the world, they are secretive, insular and reclusive, living in their swamps and trying to stay out of the way of others.

However I cannot see how kobolds, goblins and hobgoblins (as distinct from orcs), bugbears, or ogres could be integrated. Such communities would have to be large and known, and the fact that the Professor didn't mention them makes such integration into the world to be jarring. Such creatures should simply be translated to orcs – after all, the goblins of Goblin's Gate in The Hobbit were simply orcs by another name. Add more variation to orcs and orc tribes, and thus there will be no need for such other races.

Likewise, Broo, Morokanth and Dragonewts are specific to an alternate world, and it would jar the sensibilities for them to be imported, lock, stock and barrel. If they are intrinsic to a plot, then maybe that plot just simply should not

be used in Middle Earth.

This is even more imperative when we get to the more fantastic of creatures. Here we need to look at the basis of such creatures. Dryads, Nereids and sylphs could fit in quite well – gorgons, the Medusa, chimera, minotaurs and Pegasus[4] would not.

In many games systems, the increase in complexity is caused by increasing the weirdness of the monsters. In Middle Earth, it should be by increasing the complexity of the adventure. Don't make all orcs easy push-overs – give them intelligence, skill and personality; that way, when the players get better, so can the orcs.

The Undead

Whilst a subset of monsters, the undead deserve their own section. In many systems, undead are considered as cannon-fodder. In Middle Earth, they are truly scary. You need to particularly ensure that this is so. Skeletons require powerful magic to bring them into being – they should not fall over at the slightest touch. You need to make sure that whenever the PCs hear about undead, they get worried. Make them rare and tough.

My own personal feeling is that the longer they have been dead, the tougher they should be. Zombies are reasonably easy to knock over. Skeletons should be a lot tougher. And wraiths, well, do you have a weapon of Westernesse handy?

Magic

Which brings us to magic. Magic is rare and personal in ME, and the adventures should reflect this. No generic magic items – any magic should be distinct and distinguished – in effect, it should have a form of personality. This doesn't mean that you cannot have "masterwork" items, but anything that is actually enchanted should be treasured. No throwing away of a +1 sword when you find a +2 sword, and definitely no village magic shops.

And no city or town mages, or village enchanters – magic is rare, unusual, and mostly feared by the normal, "honest, decent folk." Of course it is known and part of the environment, but it is not entirely natural. As a certain well-known innkeeper was to remark, "A wizard they say he is, but he's a good friend of mine, whether or no. But now I don't know what he'll have to say to me, if I see him again: turn my ale sour or me into a block of wood, I shouldn't wonder."[5]

Reduce the level of magic power available to both the players and their foes – and most especially reduce their number.

Logic, Consistency and Reason

All adventures need to be at least semi-realistic in their approach, in that they are logical and consistent. Among other things, this would imply the following: -

- No monsters that live on air – all environments should provide a realistic environment to support long-term existence. No mortal enemies living peacefully next door to each other, with no food, water or toilet facilities.

- Creatures should not exist solely to be killed. All critters should have a reason, even if not apparent to the PCs, as to why they are where they are, and why they are doing what they are doing.
- No stupid puzzles, jokes or other silly things that tend to break the fourth wall – it should be up to the player's

---

[4]   Strictly speaking, there is only one Pegasus, as it was the actual proper name of the winged horse. His offspring, the winged horses, were actually called pterippus. But I digress…
      [5] *The Fellowship of the Ring: "Strider" p. 179*

characters to finish the adventure, not the players themselves. Humour should come from inside the adventure, not outside.

Combat and Death

Combat should be difficult, and death a major event. Think of the deaths of Boromir and Théoden as examples here. Personality matters here, not just cold hard dice rolling and calculations.

- Monsters should fight to the best of their intelligence and abilities, not simply line up all in a row to be dispatched one at a time with a single blow.

- PCs will not automatically be better then most monsters – a single orc will generally be more than a match for any beginning characters, and should even give more experienced characters a run for their money. Think here of the orc from Khazud-Dûm, who, "…turned Boromir's sword and bore him backwards. [Dived] under Aragorn's blow [and] charged into the company and thrust with his spear straight at Frodo." If the good guys have heroes, so to should the bad guys.

- Bad guys, or at least the senior ones, should be given a personality. It is better to have a distinct individual as the main protagonist, rather than some mindless overwhelming force of grunts. Yes, the majority of the orcs were simply cut down, but think here of the orcs that bore away Merry and Pippin, particularly Grishnákh and Uglúk. Without their infighting, Merry and Pippin would most likely have been killed by the Rohirrim. Without the dispute between Gorbag and Shagrat, Frodo would not have been able to be rescued by Sam.

- Combat should be deadly to the unprepared. The environment should be harsh, and any player who waltzes into combat without a care should be punished. On the other hand, combat should offer a reward for those players who can think, and can ambush or fight intelligently. Ensure also that the bad guys can also take preparations, and will do so if allowed.

- It would be assumed that players will invest a reasonable amount into their characters, and as such, sudden instant death should be avoided. No death traps unless players can avoid them by their actions, not by making a lucky role. No instant death poisons. No overwhelming enemies – if they do something stupid, then kill them, but always give them a chance to all escape from the adventure alive.

- If they do die, the death should hopefully be heroic. Whilst Middle Earth is realistic, it is also heroic fantasy, and players like the idea that their characters are doing more than the mundane.

Treasure

And as such, we come to the final notes – the rewards for putting yourself at such risk.

As stated before, the PCs are expected to be altruistic. Treasure should be a bonus, not the sole reason for adventuring. As such, it needs to be minimised in quantity, but given some decent quality. Like the adventure to gain it, the reward itself also needs to be memorable.
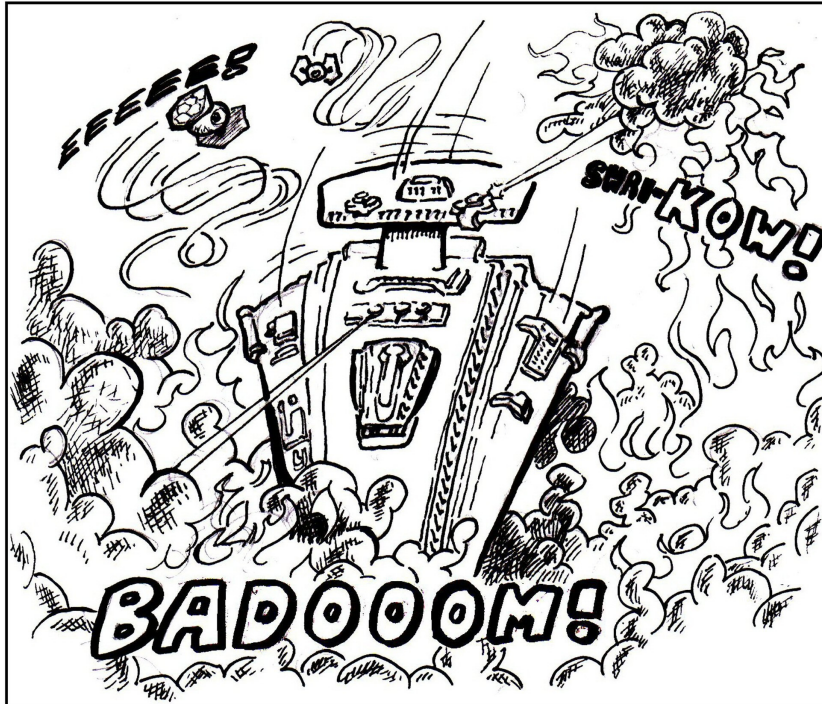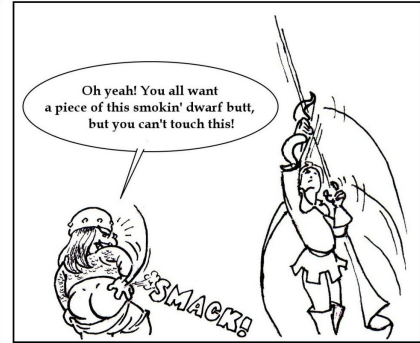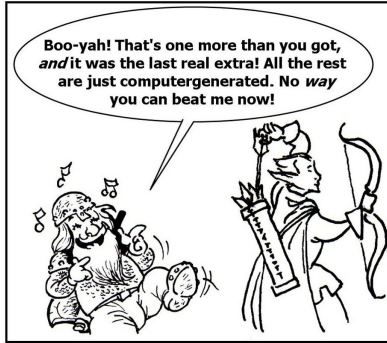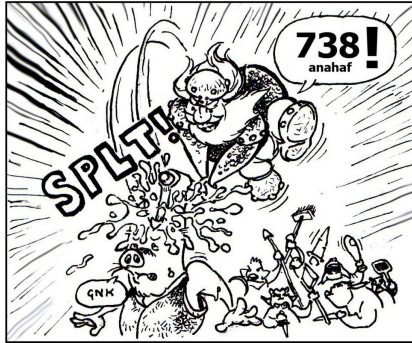
Rolemaster/M.E.R.P. and LoTR PRG Retrospective

by Lev Lafayette

The Two Towers

There are two major systems which attempted to provide a rules system for Tolkien's Middle-Earth; Iron Crown Enterprise's Rolemaster/MERP and Decipher's The Lord of the Rings Roleplaying Game. The two systems are significantly different and were separated by some decades in game development and design. This article reviews both the systems in their own right and secondly how well they integrates with the themes and expectations of a Middle Earth roleplaying campaign. There are five parts to this review; Rolemaster, MERP and the Middle Earth modules, the fall of ICE's Middle Earth project, the new era of Decipher, and the use of other game systems.

So It Begins... Rolemaster

The first edition of *Rolemaster* - largely indistinguishable in content from second edition and the most recently released "*Rolemaster Classic*" - begin with *Arms Law* and *Claw Law* as separate packages and then as a boxed set (and with significantly improved surreal art by Matthew J. Jorgensen), a boxed set for *Spell Law* with four booklets (excellent art initially by Jorgensen again, and then a beautiful piece by Gail McIntosh) and softbound books for *Character Law* and initially *Campaign Law*, with Vog Mur campaign setting initially included. In later printings *Arms Law* and *Claw Law* were combined into a single book, as was *Spell Law* and finally, *Character Law* and *Campaign Law* combined. Each of those latter cases featured competent art by Gail McIntosh. The so-called second edition of the rules, which was largely a clarification and re-organisation of what was now three core books - somehow *Creatures & Treasures* never made it as core rules - with a set of cartoon-like covers of good quality by Angus McBride.

Rolemaster has been castigated as "Chartmaster" and nowhere is this most obvious than in the combat system, where there was one table for each weapon in Arms Law. In comparison, *Claw Law* was a little more sensible with one chart per group of weapons (e.g., Bite, Claw, Grapple, Trample, etc) with sized-based maxima. The system had a "first strike points" initiative system, followed by an open-ended d100 roll (rolls of 96 or more "explode" and additional rolls are added), plus skill etc, minus defense etc, with a final result cross-referenced against one of twenty armour types (ranging from 1 'No Armour' to 20 'Full Plate') with results indicating either a miss, a number of 'concussion hits' or 'concussion hits', plus a critical value (A to E, E being most severe) and type (Krush, Slash, Puncture, Grapple etc), with size-based variants (Large and Superlarge). These criticals, also rolled on d100, give a variety of results including additional concussion hits, bleeding, stunning and gory details which often raised at least a gratuitous smirk around the gaming table.

There was fair detail in terms of armour, a good distinction between natural and artificial weapons, along with critical details and some good core principles implemented in the tables. Characters in heavy armour were easy to hit, but took minor damage and low-powered criticals; characters in light armour were harder to hit but would receive more serious wounds. However, when confronted by faster creatures, the relative maneuverability was lost - light armoured characters would be seriously damaged by attacks by tooth and claw. But the limited penetration of such attacks meant that well-armoured characters were highly protected (except, for example, unbalancing attacks). But there were also some oddities which didn't quite work; one armour type (2 - heavy robes) stands out as a sore thumb, being significantly prone to criticals and hits. Perhaps surprisingly from a first glance, the system was fairly easy to run in actual play - although the more clustered expression in *Claw Law* was easier than the one-table-per-weapon method of *Arms Law*.

Spell Law was broken up into four parts; definition and use, and one part for each of the three realms of magic. Channeling is magic from the gods and supernatural forces, Essence from natural magic energy and Mentalism from

the mind). Within the spell realms are lists, groups of similar spells, defined as "Open" lists for the realm, the easiest to learn, "Closed" lists and a large number fo strongly-typed professional "Base" lists (e.g., Magician, Cleric, Mentalist etc) which are usually realm-specific with some crossover professions (e.g., a Sorcerer is Channeling and Essence) and semi-spell using professions (e.g., Ranger). Spell lists go from 1st to 50th level, although many of the spells are simply variations on each other (e.g., Summons I, Summons II, Summons III). So whilst the advertised copy of the product having over 2,000 spells is accurate, it is more accurate to pay attention to the total number of lists - 162. The spells themselves have a fairly good scope for standard high fantasy games and are largely balanced.

Spell casting itself was a d100 roll, cross-referenced on a base attack which modified a resistance roll or elemental spell attack table. Inert material reduces the ability to cast Essence spells, metal reduces the ability to receive the power for Channeling spells and Mentalism was more difficult when wearing headgear. Elemental attack spells were like Arms Law weapons; "hits and crits" and with their own tables. Characters would receive 1-2 spell points per level depending on an associated stat (Intuition for Channeling, Empathy for Essence or Presence for Mentalism). The sheer quantity proved a little tricky in actual play and was not helped by the fact that individual spells are quite variable in terms of duration, range and so forth.

Character Law and *Campaign Law* were, as mentioned, typically published in the same book although this would have been more for practical, page-count reasons. As a modular system, it was only with the publication of *Character Law* that Rolemaster became a game system in its own right. Characters have ten "stats"; Constitution, Agility, Self-Discipline, Memory, Strength, Quickness, Presence, Empathy and Intuition, each with a temporary and potential value with expressed in a racial percentage range. The combination of the stat bonus from the character's race (standard fantasy scope) and their raw stat bonus, which kicked in at scores above 75 and less than 25, is what mattered. For example, an Elf with Self-Discipline of 99% would receive a raw stat bonus of +20. However Elves also receive a racial stat penalty of -20; meaning that a highly disciplined elf is the equivalent of an average common man. This principle was *mostly* followed through; on some occasions (e.g., development points, used to determine the number of skill advances per level) the raw stat was erroneously used instead of the total stat bonus.

Rolemaster is a class/level game with skills, although the classes were far less restrictive than other games of the time. Skills, which are usually action and adventurer orientated, are learned in ranks which provide a bonus; rank zero is worth -25, ranks 1-10 give a bonus of +5, ranks 11-20 a bonus of +2, ranks 21-30 a bonus of +1 and ranks 31+ a bonus of 0.5 each. Skill resolution is based on an open-ended d100 roll plus the skill rank bonus, plus the stat bonus, and plus or minus difficulty levels and detailed environmental variables. *Character Law* provided nineteen adventurer-type professions, differentiated by the different realms of magical power or arms. A good feature of *Rolemaster* is that no character is prohibited from learning a skill; rather there are extra difficulties involved as the training and mind-set is conducive to some areas of expertise and not for others. Thus, a Fighter will be able to pick up a new weapon and learn it with relative ease; not so a Magician - and of course the reverse applies for learning spells.

However, overall *Character Law* is probably the worst of the Rolemaster series. The less unrestrictive class/skill system was fair, but the sheer quantity of character professions did not add much to the substance of the game, the scope of the skill and resolution systems was only average at best, and the time required for character generation and engage in character development during level advances was too great. Further, there was only the most modest attention to matters which are now core features of character generation in RPGs - like personality, alignment, demeanor, background etc.

Finally, there's *Campaign Law*, consisting of two main parts (a) how to build a game world (b) and how to run a campaign. The organisation of the text begins with an outline/checklist, setting up the cosmological and physical structure, flora and fauna, sentient beings and culture, starting a campaign, handling play, campaign development, and ending a campaign. The style of *Campaign Law* is pretty dry but it doesn't waste words either. Whilst lacking a thorough treatment of cosmology and religion, the material for geography, ecology and sociology were excellent, and indeed remain the best to date in gaming publications. The second part of the book, dealing with "setting the world in motion", separates "world time" from "strategic time" from "tactical time" (note the wargame language still pervades)

and provides useful mechanisms in accord to the key theme "Avoid a Sense of Contrivance". At a mere 22 pages of useful and dense information *Campaign Law* is a much-overlooked gem in the history of gaming and the best core rules product ever released by ICE.

The appropriateness of *Rolemaster* to Middle Earth is questionable at best. Whilst *Arms Law/Claw Law* certainly provided a sense of immediate danger of combat, the thematic treatment was not the best. *Spell Law*, in comparison, was a very good system for a high-magic fantasy environment. It suited ICE's Shadow World scenarios perfectly, however for the subtle magics of Middle Earth it was an extremely poor fit. *Character Law*, with its strong emphasis on magic-using adventuring professions also did not capture the flavour of Middle Earth particularly well either. Finally, whilst the minimal notes on cosmology and religion in *Campaign Law* were inadvertently appropriate, the more deliberate work on geography, ecology and sociology were extremely useful as future products would show.

MERP and ICE'S Modules

Much of the original Rolemaster system was developed during Peter Fenlon's Middle-Earth campaign, and in 1982 ICE signed an exclusive, worldwide agreement with Tolkien Enterprises, which initially saw a Guidebook for Middle-Earth, followed by a number of truly excellent regional campaign books (e.g., "Agmar", "Umbar", "Court of Ardor", "Northern Mirkwood", "Southern Mirkwood", "Isengard" and "Northern Gondor", "Moria", "Rangers of the North"). As a bit of an oddity, the company set the default campaign setting in TA 1640, some 1400 years before the War of the Ring. It is notable that the campaign books made excellent use of the structure in Campaign Law, each providing (apart from perhaps over-lengthy conversion notes), the historical context of the region, flora and fauna, various cultures, major NPCs and, of course, some superb maps.

At this point ICE decided to release *Middle Earth Role Playing* or MERP. It was pretty much a cut-down version of Rolemaster with a fair range of Middle-Earth specific background material integrated with the system. Designed for levels 1-10 only, the game had six stats, compared to Rolemaster's ten, and no "potential" stats either, some twenty-seven race/culture combinations, and six adventuring professions. Instead of "Development Points" characters received a number of ranks in skill categories at each level and could transfer between categories at varying cost according to the initial distribution. The skill-system was likewise simplified down to twenty four primary skills, plus spell lists and languages. Compared to *Rolemaster*, *MERP*'s character generation system was streamlined, contextual and yet without any great loss of realism.

Character activity in MERP was skills, spells and combat. MERP made a use of various "Movement in Armour" skills and informative static action charts for most skills, and with a more minimal weapon skill list, had combat charts for groups of weapons rather than individual weapons, rather like Claw Law. The critical charts were reduced in scope and detail, which led to significant repetition of results. The magic system distinguished between Essence magic (for Mages and Bards) and Chanelling (for Animists and Rangers) with spells grouped into similar lists. Spell-casting was virtually identical to that used in *Spell Law*, but more importantly for a Middle Earth context, was completely inappropriate to the setting. Oddly, the realm of mentalism from Rolemaster may have been perhaps the best fit for Middle Earth given system restrictions, but it was the one of the three that was not included. Finally, the Middle-Earth support material in MERP was fairly good as well. Fifteen pages - and in reduced font - provided an excellent introduction to races and cultures of Middle Earth and likewise the descriptions of the various creatures of Middle Earth..

Following the release of MERP, ICE produced a number of Middle Earth adventure scenarios where the background material was de-emphasised in favour of greater detail in adventure leads making the products "ready to play", of which "Bree and the Barrow Downs" is perhaps the most well-known, and the "Haunted Ruins of the Dunlendings" is the best example of the new orientation and "Thieves of Tharbad" as an excellent example of intrigue and politics. Of course, ICE continued to make some excellent high-quality campaign books, such as "The Lost Realm of Cardolan", "Far Harad", "Greater Harad" and "The Shadow in the South". Of the set, "Mount Gundabad" stands out as one which perhaps was not of the same standard; thousands of Orcs with nowhere to go and no discernable food source. It was a bit of a let down from a series of products that took such supposedly prosaic issues seriously. This was also a period of

supplementary material for Middle-Earth; Lord of Middle Earth came in three volumes, a second Guidebook was published and supplements were released for Creatures, Treasures and Character's of Middle Earth.

The Fall of Angband

To my mind the beginning of the end for ICE's products in Middle-Earth came from four main sources. Firstly, in 1991 with the release of the *Lord of the Rings Adventure Game*. Secondly, was the publication of a new edition of Middle Earth Role Playing. Thirdly was the release of the *Rolemaster Standard System*, and finally a series of financial disasters for the company.

Now the first thing that must be understood that the *Lord of the Rings Adventure Game*, or LOR, was not a bad game at all. It was designed as a rules-light system to introduce new players to the game in a very familiar setting (i.e., just before the War of the Ring). Character cultures and professions were simplistic and restrictive with a total of nine combinations (Hobbit or Elf Scout, Human, Dwarf or Elf Warrior, Human or Half-Elf Ranger, and Human or Elf Bard) and only three stats (Strength, Agility and Intelligence). There was only a handful of skills, derived from the MERP skill categories (Melee, Missile, General, Subterfuge, Perception, Magic), and resolution was based on 2d6. Spell-casters were restricted to a very limited range and magics were quite subtle - certainly a lot more than those produced by previous ICE games. The scenarios were presented in a highly structured manner, almost like an adventure gamebook, making the products suitable for solitaire play.

Apart from the fact however there was already another publication with the same name (a board game published by Milton Bradley in the 70s), LOR just simply didn't sell and the final two scenarios planned for a six-part interlinked story were never released. Rather than acting as a bridge to the more complex MERP, it ended up diluting that market. In 1993, MERP second edition was published (actually third), weighing in at 268 pages, but without a strong revision of the rules; the only new additions was an expansion to the secondary skills list and optional "corruption points" for casting spells with impure motives. There was a great deal of extra background material and *many* pages dedicated to sample characters templates, but as a new edition this was a disappointment. For the dedicated MERP player there was simply no reason whatsoever to buy the book; the game still had the same races, professions, resolution method and, incredibly, despite the tome's size, was still limited to 10th level!

This said, most of the new supplements that were released for MERP for the second edition were mostly of fair to good quality. There was a the near-empty box of the Accessory Pack (the space was handy to put the rulebook in), and a certain obsession with Arnor (a massive campaign module - including a lot of reprinted material, a people book and a land book), and a fairly unimaginative but massive Minas Tirth, the supplments for Lake Town, The Kin-Strife, Hands of the Healer etc were well received, as was the campaign supplement "Palantir Quest". But again, like the LOR line, these supplements simply were not generating high sales. Dedicated MERP players from the 1980s already had a shelf full of supplements and the initial new supplements (the new rulebook, the accessory pack, Minas Tirith, Arnor) did not provide much encouragement for new purchases.

If MERP second edition increased cost and page-size without improvements to substance, *Rolemaster Standard System* managed to do both these *and* increase the complexity of that game - with similar results. Very few new players were attracted to the new edition of *Rolemaster* and many of the older players simply continued with the 1st/2nd edition of the original system supplemented with material from the various Companions. Despite a core rulebook of over 350 pages, one also needed at least new editions of *Spell Law* and *Arms Law* as well to actually play the game; what was provided was a character generation and skill resolution system with now *hundreds* of skills, sixteen races, twenty professions, and thirty-six "training packages". The newer version of what is largely the same rule-set, *Rolemaster Fantasy Roleplaying*, provides a book that is at least playable in its own right with much better organisation of the rules, but limited to - you guessed it - 10th level. In all three cases - MERP second edition, *Rolemaster Standard System* and *Rolemaster Fantasy Roleplaying* - it was obvious that ICE's design were oblivious to some improvements in game design throughout the eighties and nineties.

ICE had already suffered terribly in the late 80s when Allen & Unwin forced ICE to recall and destroy its Tolkien Quest gamebook, costing over $2 million dollars for the firm and in the early 90s finances were incredibly tight; freelancers weren't being paid and as a result, stopped contributing (I remember that my advance cheque for Rolemaster Companion VI - a modest $400 - bounced). In the mid-nineties, ICE had released the popular, albeit complex, Middle Earth Collectible Card Game, which brought in great revenues for a while, but resulted in a *very* expensive overprinting of a second edition of the game - just as Tolkien Enterprises began inquiries on a mounting debt ICE had to that organisation for royalties over various Middle Earth products. In 1999, Tolkien Enterprises called in its debts, and ICE fell into bankruptcy and eventually ICE's remaining stock would be *destroyed* (this is a clear example on why economics and commerce are often competing, rather than complementary, disciplines in academia) on Tolkien Enterprise's orders.

Decipher and the New Era

Shortly after forcing ICE into bankruptcy, Tolkien Enterprises signed a agreement with Decipher, Inc., for a new Middle Earth roleplaying game. Originally a puzzle and card-game company - and doing particularly well with the latter, picking up licenses for Star Trek and Star Wars licenses - the company built two highly marketable roleplaying systems around their own ruleset (the CODA system); a Star Trek Roleplaying Game and a Lord of the Rings Roleplaying Game.

The *Lord of the Rings Roleplaying Game* (LoTR RPG) is a work of physical beauty; a solid harback, good binding and full-colour throughout replete with imagery from Peter Jackson's acclaimed movies. It is crying shame then, that there are a number of typographical errors throughout, that the organisation of the rules could do with modest improvements. The same physical quality is also evident in other supplements released for game, such as "The Fellowship of the Ring", "The Two Towers" and "Fell Beasts & Wondrous Magic", which also came with a share of minor errors; whilst these have all been noted in a single package on the Decipher website, but it is annoying nevertheless. The books come with evocative quotes from The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, illustrating particular rules. There is excellent material throughout the core and supplementary texts, and the game made significant effort to emphasise the particular style and themes of Middle Earth and often incorporated such a perspective into the rule system itself.

The game itself is mostly quite sound. Character race provides a number of setting specific abilities, often with evocative names (e.g., Hobbits receive "Tough as Old Tree Roots", referring to their ability to resist the corrupting influences of magic). There are six attributes, Bearing, Nimbleness, Perception, Strength, Vitality and Wits, with attribute bonuses typically within the range of 0 to +3. There are four reaction bonuses derived from the highest of two Attribute bonuses for various tests; Stamina, Swiftness, Willpower and Wisdom. There are also two other attributes, Courage and Renown. The latter is simply used for social recognition tests. The former allows characters to gain bonuses for particular actions and even to engage in actions which are deemed to be particularly fearful (e.g., confronting a Ringwraith). There are nine basic classes, or Orders, as the game calls them, which include both adventurer and non-adventurer professions; Barbarian, Craftsman, Loremaster, Magician, Mariner, Minstrel, Noble, Rogue, Warrior. Orders come with a number of packages which further define the profession. For example, if you take Craftsman you can choose Gardener as the package, or a Warrior can take the Sentinel package, specialising in protecting fortresses. After some experience characters may also advance to an "elite order", such as a Ranger or even a Wizard.

Characters also come with skills, traits and sometimes magic. The skill list is short, about two score, but with excellent scope. Combat skills are thankfully reduced to a mere three items (armed, unarmed and ranged) and the emphasis is on what characters do rather than how well they fight. Most skills have a specialisation which provides a +2 bonus to tests. Test themselves involve a target number, a 2d6 roll, plus skill level, plus attribute bonus. It's rather like d20 but with a bell-curve for results and a reduced range of randomness, both of which are positives. In comparison, Traits in the LoTR RPG, refer to positive (edges) and negative (flaws) traits to the character; physical, social or mental. Finally, the magic system is excellent, setting-wise. There are specialities of magic (e.g., various elemental, Sorcery (evil), Secret Fire (good), and Beasts and Birds (neutral)) which can be taken for greater ease in casting. Spellcasting comes in

different methods as well, including Runes (such as the Dwarves) or Songs of Power (such as the Elves). Spells themselves require a Stamina test for Weariness, and a failure indicates a loss of a Weariness level and a failure to cast the spell. The spell list itself describes modest magics with subtle effects, almost at the level of the literary genre of magical realism.

If the game has a serious weak point, it's the combat system. The general structure is fair enough; six-second combat rounds, normally two actions per round, contested Swiftness test for initiative, roll test to hit, possible counter parry or dodge, roll damage, subtract armour, apply damage. However, the details are devilish on two particular points. Firstly, armour is comparatively weak compared to weapon damage. The average sword will do 12 points of damage, before taking into account Strength bonuses. Chainmail will protect for a mere 5 points, Platemail for only six and leather for but 2 points. On the other side of the coin, characters have far too many hit points. An average character (base hit points 8 per wound level, standard six wound levels, total hit points = 54), wearing no armour, would have to be struck by a longsword five times, before they fall. Combat even against modest opponents thus becomes an extremely dull part of the game. One suggested response is to simply halve the hit points as calculated, increasing the tactical stakes and speeding up resolution.

The supplements for LoTR RPG were of a high standard, but they never generated the creative feel that cam with the ICE produced material. The followed the films and books too closely in most cases (the Moria boxed set being an negative exception in this regard) and did not provide sufficient opportunity for GMs and players to become particularly creative in telling their Middle Earth story. It may come across as somewhat odd, but perhaps the best combination would be using the general LoTR ruleset and the ICE supplements.

Other Systems

Not surprisingly, other gamers have also attempted to make Middle Earth fit their favourite game system. Some in the past took great pains to explain why their game system was inappropriate for Middle Earth or, even more to the point, why fantasy novels themselves make poor game material. The articles by Gary Gygax are an example of this approach (*Books are Books, Games are Games* from The Dragon, November 1979); he also acknowledged the use of Tolkien's material in AD&D "in a superficial manner merely to get their [fans of Middle Earth] attention" (*The Influence of J.R.R. Tolkien on the D&D and AD&D game*, The Dragon, March 1985). Nevertheless, there was a particularly brave attempt to integrate the story into the book according to the powers actually used; Gandalf ended up being a mere eighth level as a result (Stephen Bland, *Lore of the Ring*, White Dwarf, August 1982) by More recently there has been extensive development of Eä, a d20/D&D3.x ruleset and supplements (c.f, http://www.merp.com/downloads/Ea-d20).

There are some excellent notes for adapting the Amber game system to Middle Earth by Phil Hall (cf., http://home.mchsi.com/~philhall1969/amber-merp.htm) which makes some particular effort with the magic system for what is usually a game system with modest mechanical detail. Gary Ashburn also has provided fairly extensive notes to illustrate the main themes of Middle Earth magic for Harnmaster in the article "Midgaard Magic" (cf., http://www.columbiagames.com/HarnPage/harnmaster/magic/mid_magic.html). For GURPS, Incánus has provided some notes for advantages, disadvantages, weapons and magic items etc, but surprisingly not for magic (cf., http://www.thecabal.org/gurps/rareitems/merules.html).

Others swear of the perfection of *Burning Wheel* as a Tolkien-appropriate game and certainly there is an element of truth in this. Certainly the racial emotional attributes (greed for Dwarves, Grief for Elves, Hatred for Orcs) add to this, and the magic system seems quite suitable as well, distinguishing between sorcery, emotional, and natural magics. The *Monster Burner* supplement also adds a number of Tolkienesque creatures, such as Giant Spiders, Great Wolves and so forth. The French however swear by two very different locally produced games, *Terre des Heros* (cf., http://storygame.free.fr/tdh.htm) and *Tiers Age* (cf., http://couroberon.free.fr/Somta.html). Another game system of note include Heren Turambarion's homebrew Ambarquenta currently some 240 pages and at edition 5.9, which indicates that some work has gone into its development over the seven years also significant sections are taken word-for-word from previous publications (cf., http://middle-earth.heim.at/html/content/ambarquenta.html).

A Walk Through The Shire: A Warhammer FRPG Scenario

by James Haughten

Mrs Maplethorpe's Muffins: A jaunt for several young hobbits up to some innocent mischief.

Mrs Mila Maplethorpe is one of the most renowned makers of yuletide muffins in the whole of the Shire, which is saying quite something. The mere thought of these moist, flavourful delicacies, stuffed with raisins and plum brandy, sets the mouth of every hobbit-child watering, and come baking time Mila, aided by her dog Garm, has often chased "the little scamps" from her door, or from the window closest to the cooling rack. However, rumour hath it that this season Mila's speed with the whacking broomstick is not what it once was, and so a party of brave young hobbits have gathered, determined to prove that this yule, stolen muffins will taste the sweetest.

The theft will take place as part of a game of "Bagginses". *"Mad Baggins, who used to disappear with a bang and a flash and reappear with bags full of gold, became a favourite character at hobbit storytime."*

If the young hobbits are playing "Bagginses" then they will refer to Garm as "Smaug", Mila as "Thorin" (these stories get confused sometimes), the muffins as "The Arkenstone", Sheriff Odo as "The Great Goblin" and may also assign themselves dwarvish names from Bilbo's companions. The aim, of course, is to steal the treasure from the Dragon, Thorin, and any other guardians that might happen along.

However, all is not so simple. Mrs Maplethorpe has been victimised by a genuine rogue, Andwise "Fingers" Bolger who has cruelly taken advantage of the dear old biddy's fading eyesight. Happening into her bakery while she was preparing the muffins, Fingers switched the farthing coins usually baked into the muffins with valuable silver coins stolen from inside her tea caddy, figuring on buying the muffins from her and making his theft undetected even while she was frantically searching for her silver. This silver is owed to Otho Sackville-Baggins (father of Lotho and husband of Lobelia) in rent, and if it is not forthcoming, dear old Widow Maplethorpe will be turned out of her hole! By chance, the muffins which the hobbit-children have stolen are the very ones containing the coins. With Fingers after them for his ill-gotten loot and Widow Maplethorpe in dire straits, what will our brave hobbit lads and lasses do? Take the course of honour (and a whuppin')? Or stand by, spend their windfall, avoid Fingers and Sheriff Smallburrow, and see an old lady dispossessed of her hole?

A Day At The Markets

Market Day is here, and so is every young hobbit looking for a bit of excitement! There are animals to pet, friends to play with, treats to buy and jugglers to throw apples at! But not everything is fun and games and many mysteries await the curious. Why is Millie's big sister hanging around with Andwise Bolger the Muffin Thief? Why does Lotho "Pimple-face" Sackville-Baggins want to buy so much pipeweed? Why is Tolban the Pony Man selling Snowbell to Shave-Me-Own-Feet Delver, and what is in S.M.O.F. Delver's pies anyway?

Short answers: Because he's tough and smokes; in order to sell it to Saruman; Because Snowbell is old and Tolban needs the money; To make her into proto-gelatin so that his fruit pies will stick together properly.

A character with Herb Lore or similar can (with a successful test) teach SMOF some other method of making pies sticky. Tolman can get his money by selling Longbottom Leaf pipeweed at an inflated price to Lotho. Longbottom leaf can be stolen from Andwise (who pinched it anyway) if inferior quality leaf is substituted. Substituting an inferior or stronger brand will make him cough a lot and appear uncool to Millie's big sister who will lose interest. So much for

the feeble plot.

Unskilled Hobbit													
M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Dex	Ld	Int	Cl	WP	Fel
3	20	30	2	2	5	50	1	40	20	30	20	40	40

Skills: Cook 36%; Silent Move Rural 33%; Herb Lore 25%

Mila Maplethorpe													
M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Dex	Ld	Int	Cl	WP	Fel
2	25	30	2	2	5	55	1	40	20	30	20	40	60

Skills: Cook 99%; Silent Move Rural 33%; Herb Lore 66%; Identify Plant 50%

Garm the Dog													
M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Dex	Ld	Int	Cl	WP	Fel
5	41	0	2	2	4	30	1	-	43	18	43	43	20

Shave Me Own Feet Delver, Journeyman Hawker													
M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Dex	Ld	Int	Cl	WP	Fel
3	33	30	2	2	7	50	1	40	20	43	20	40	53

Skills: Cook 05%; Silent Move Rural 33%; Herb Lore 05%; Blather 37%; Evaluate 33%; Haggle 33%; Wit 33%; Numismatics 25%.

Andwise Bolger, Apprentice Pickpocket													
M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Dex	Ld	Int	Cl	WP	Fel
3	25	35	2	2	6	55	1	45	20	30	20	40	45

Skills: Cook 20%; Silent Move Rural 50%; Herb Lore 25%; Silent Move Urban 25%; Concealment Urban 25%; Palm Object 25%; Pick Pocket 25%; Flee! (4.5 M when fleeing)

Lotho "Pimple" Sackville-Baggins, Bailiff													
M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Dex	Ld	Int	Cl	WP	Fel
3	20	30	2	2	7	60	1	50	30	30	20	40	50

Skills: Cook 36%; Silent Move Rural 33%; Herb Lore 25%; Animal Care 25%; Identify Plants 25%; Stewardship 25%; Drive Cart 33%; Evaluate 33%; Ride Pony 33%

Tolban Chubb, Pony Trader													
M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Dex	Ld	Int	Cl	WP	Fel
3	40	30	2	2	8	50	1	40	20	50	30	40	50

Skills: Cook 36%; Silent Move Rural 33%; Herb Lore 25%; Animal Care (Horses, Mules and Ponies) 33%; Whip; Drive Cart 33%; Animal Training 33%; Evaluate 33%; Haggle 33%; Numismatics 25%

Millie's Sister, Barmaid													
M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Dex	Ld	Int	Cl	WP	Fel
3	30	30	2	2	7	60	1	40	20	30	20	40	50

Skills: Cook 36%; Silent Move Rural 33%; Herb Lore 25%; Brewing 33%; Dodge Blow 25%; Wit 25%; Seduction 25%

Sheriff Smallburrow													
M	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Dex	Ld	Int	Cl	WP	Fel
3	30	40	3	2	7	60	2	40	30	30	20	40	50

Skills: Cook 36%; Silent Move Rural 33%; Herb Lore 25%; Ride Pony 33%; Strike to Stun; Law 25%; Public Speaking 25%; Etiquette 25%

The Wanderers and the farmer's daughter.

The mother of Violet Tunnelly believes that ghosts are walking across her farm at night, and she is terrified. Our friends join the family for a night in order to "keep watch".

Theme: Sometimes borders must be protected. Sometimes they must be opened.

Searching the farm reveals an ancient stone. If watch is kept during the night (which requires resisting the charms of Violet) then they will discover the truth of the ghosts: A company of elves is migrating to the west along an ancient route that passes this stone. Offering the elves violence would be foolhardy in the extreme, but they will go around the farm if resolutely requested. However, this encounter does give a bold hobbit the opportunity to walk with the elves, perhaps even as far as the White Tower, from which they may be shown a glimpse of the sea. Particularly courteous and learned hobbits may be named elf-friend (raising their Luck and perhaps other appropriate characteristics) and receive some gift of light (which may be vital in future).

Bilbo's Birthday

Uncle Bilbo is turning eleventy-one, and promises to hold a party bigger than anything! There are going to be fireworks, and cakes, and presents for everyone! Don't miss out!

This session is the end of childhood for the party. We may just show the relevant section of the movie, until Bilbo disappears. After that, we describe the confusion and everything, the hobbits receive their presents, and we finish on the line "You have the feeling that after this, nothing will be the same".

Presents should be slightly magical, whimsical, and useful in a non-violent fashion. For example;

A book will grant +5%/+1 in her rolls to learn/improve Quenya (Magick). It also contains several minor spells.

A mandolin has a variety of abilities when played. It will grant +5% on any rolls using Seduction or Charm Animal. If played in the presence of hostile creatures capable of appreciating music (e.g. Orcs or Dragons, but not Spiders) the Mandolin can cast a "Sleep" spell once per week.

A sickle, besides being an natural emblem, gives +5% on any rolls using herbs which have been cut with it. It counts as a magic weapon for the purposes of striking magical creatures.

A lantern will never go out unless deliberately extinguished, or it runs out of oil, even if dropped, kicked, etc. It will also never set fire to things it shouldn't. If thrown at an enemy or group of enemies it will explode as a level 1 fireball, which destroys the lantern.

A pipe gives +5% to any Cool tests taken while smoking it, and +1 point of Armour against cold-based attacks. It can also make pretty smoke rings and figures. If the pipe is puffed vigorously for a full combat round, it can cast the "Cloud of Smoke" spell once per week.

A tale of love and loss.

The Mace of the Tooks, symbol of their thaindom, has gone missing, as has the hobbits' friend, Isumbras. Isumbras has fallen in love with a river nymph and sought to impress her with a gift of the most impressive thing he knew of, the mace. Unfortunately the nymph was not at all impressed with "an ugly old bit of wood", especially when Isumbras was too embarrassed to suggest what she might do with it. The Thain is now furious that his symbol of authority is missing and Isumbras has gone into hiding and is trying to "end it all" by walking into the Old Forest. Our brave tweenage hobbits must rescue their friend from the trees, persuade him to tell the story, convince the nymph to give up her gift, and reconcile the Took clan.

Bullroarer's Mace: The Mace used by Bandobras Took was scribed and enchanted by the Rangers to capture something of Bullroarer's spirit after the Battle of Greenfields. + 1 S, +10 Ld if wielded by the Thain or a Took. Mighty Strike: 3 times a Day for a Thain, twice for a Took, once for any other wielder. Wielder is subject to Frenzy.

As a possible result of this quest, Bombadil is befriended and after the war of the ring - journey to the Emyn Vorn and bring back a group of Woses to establish a colony in the Old Forest.

The Sheep on the Borderlands.

Theme: Taking on the responsibilities of adulthood.

Several of farmer Frego's sheep, which he grazes on the north downs, have gone missing, perhaps taken by wolves! Fearless, strapping young hobbits are needed to track down the culprits and retrieve the sheep. As a special favour, the characters may borrow the mace of Tookland for this hazardous quest.

Wolves have indeed taken some of Frego's sheep. However, the wolves in their turn have had the misfortune to be squashed by a small but hungry Hill-troll, who is busy making and eating wolf sausage in sheep intestines and vice versa in what was the wolves' cave. This Hill-troll is a bit more intelligent than average and can be strung along by cookery or by the promise of pastries, which he fancies, having once eaten the contents of a baker's cart (plus the baker). This may enable the hobbits to bamboozle him until the sun comes up. Otherwise, they have a bare chance of killing him in combat. If they have established contact with Tom Bombadil in the past, he may be willing to help, or the hobbits may be saved by Rangers if in dire need.

The Sword of the Brandybucks

Nutmeg Baggins set out to visit Brandy Hall, the ancestral tunnels of the Brandybucks, three days ago and has not been heard of since. Her mother is quite concerned. You had better go and pull her nose out of whatever book she has found.

With the growing malice of Sauron and the turning of his will towards the Shire, evil creatures are arising across Eriador. One of these, a giant spider, has hatched from a forgotten egg underneath the Old Forest and taken up residence in the ancient back tunnels of the great Smial or Hall of the Brandybucks. Nutmeg has also been digging around in the back tunnels looking for an ancient artefact, the Thegyn-Sword of the Oldbucks, which she believes, having found an ancient manuscript, is buried there.

Nutmeg found the sword, but was then ambushed by the Spider. She succeeded in injuring the spider with the Sword, but is now hanging helpless as a future lunch, a fate that doubtless awaits many more Brandybucks unless our now more experienced heroes can destroy this evil thing. They may be granted a loan of the Mace of Tookland, but only if they can convince the Thain that there is truly some dire need, which would require some very good tracking roles or an inconclusive encounter with the Spider. They also have a chance of finding the Sword. The Spider itself, being of the brood of Ungoliant, is intelligent, but vain and in an alien manner. It may be drawn out by taunts, but is unlikely to show any interest in riddles.

Nutmeg's body may be recovered, but she has been mortally poisoned. It will require the aid of Puffin to keep her body alive and Gandalf to help her return to consciousness. The poison of the race of Ungoliant has its origins with Morgoth, and thus by assimilating the poison, Nutmeg's latent talent for magic will be strengthened and awakened. This will come at considerable cost to her, however.

Transformation of Nutmeg. Change career from Student to Seer. Gain the skill: Cast Petty Magic. Gain Immunity to Poisons: Spider venom. Gain Night Vision: 2d6 yards. Gain 4 Magic points. Lose 1 fate point. Lose 1 point of Toughness. Acquire a Minor Disorder (p.86): possibly Shaking. Acquire Cadaverous Appearance, Stage 1 (p.138) (-5%

to Fellowship).

The Thegyn-Sword: Was designed by the smiths of old Arthedain to enable the Hobbits to defend themselves after the fall of the kingdom, and thus is tailored to the weaknesses and enemies of Hobbits. Double Damage to Orcs and Trolls. + 20 Ld when wielded by the Thain. +10 Ld when wielded by a Brandybuck or Took. + 10 Cl. Causes Fear in enemies when wielded by the Thain. Causes Instability in Undead.

Strange as news from Bree.

A small dwarvish caravan has been ambushed by brigands on the road between the Shire and Bree and forced to turn back to the Shire. The surviving dwarves now seek some experienced, seasoned members of the shiremoot (newly expanded thanks to a grant from Lotho Sackville-Baggins) to help secure their caravan on the road between the Shire and Bree, where they will meet their clansmen.

This adventure offers the characters an opportunity to see lands outside the shire, particularly the outskirts of the barrow-downs and the old roads. This will become important in the next adventure. This adventure may also be a coming-of-age story for Millie as she leaves home and relies upon her musical talents to bring harmony to a situation.

The dwarves are in fact carrying weapons which are destined for Saruman's armies, from which the "brigands", rather poor and desparate but originally peaceful Dunlanders, have fled. These same weapons will turn up later in the hands of Sharkey's mercenaries. They may attempt to attack the caravan again, though they will issue demands before striking. Cunning characters may be able to play upon their desperate state by offering them land around the outskirts of The Shire, but this will not solve the quest for revenge by the Dwarves, who will only be satisfied with blood, or weighty reparations. The skills of a negotiator and bringer of peace to situations may be vital here.

The characters arrive in Bree a few months after Frodo has passed through, and so any relative of the companions may be treated with suspicion, or may even be the subject of a kidnapping attempt by Bill Ferny and co.

They Never Returned

With the rangers gone to join the great war, dark spirits now arise from the Barrow Downs. Even with the powerful heirlooms, the characters can only beat them back, not defeat them. The increasing number of dark things and brigands justifies the rapid expansion of the Shiremoot and sheriffs, bankrolled by Lotho. In this dire juncture, one (or more) of the characters receives a dream, which contains a riddle/message about the hobbits who never returned from the final battle of Arthedain. These hobbits were overpowered by undead spirits and bound in darkness. However, the spirit of a hobbit is ultimately indomitable, and they can be freed and recalled to fulfil their oaths to defend the Shire and North-kingdom in time of utmost need. This sudden assault by creatures of their own kind will confuse and weaken the Barrow wights, and they can then be laid to rest, or at least, forced back to their lairs, although final cleansing may have to await the victorious return of the King and his rangers.

The Shire is under renewed attack by wights and shades from the downs and the old forest (after Saruman broke the ward). Indirectly under attack rather than a pitched battle, isolated hobbits disappear. Black shapes attack once then disappear.

In the second session the PCs receive clear dream messages imploring them to journey away and face a fearsome foe to the northeast.

"Seek out the lost / We are your kindred / A fallen host / To ancient dread / Our horns yet sound / Our bows yet strung / The shire calls / To the shire's sons

Far north the road / From our grandsires lands / The broken walls / Of the king's burg stand / Where death's hand grasps

/ At the setting sun / To the west you go / Your journey's done."

They will be able to convince the Thain but not Mr Lotho. They embark on a journey and arrive at the barrow in which the spirits of the lost Hobbit bowmen are imprisoned and Isumbras' great uncle died. They must dispel the wight which holds them. If they can do this then the Hobbits will return and drive away the ghosts from the old forest. However all this meddling with the dead makes the shire fearful and, goaded by Grima who has now arrived, Lotho announces that the PCs and friends are banished from the Shire.

In the third session the PCs can arrange guerilla warfare against the occupying ruffians, brought in as mercenaries and gradually showing their true colours. culminates in the return of Frodo, Sam, et al, the battle of Bywater, and the confrontation with Saruman.

Various rumour include (a) The Rangers have left, (b) there are visions of Took ancestor's dead body and the door of the tomb (c) a mysterious Sorcerer by the name of Underhill is travelling the lands, (d) the White Hand is conquering the lands to the south of the Shire, (e) Sharkey gave Lotho and Otho all their money, (f) there are ghosts wandering the countryside, (g) trees have been seen walking around, (h) the ghost of Bullroarer Took has been walking the roads, (i) this winter the Brandywine will freeze and the wolves will return, (j) all the elves are leaving Middle Earth, (k) the Master of Brandy Hall is stirring up this trouble to try to take back the Thainship, (l) the Thain is senile (m) Mr Bilbo left Mr Lotho all his gold and that's why Mr Frodo left, (n) Bag End is haunted. But most importantly: (n) The Resistance needs You!

Somewhat shunned after their dealings with the supernatural in the last adventure, our matured hobbits are at a disadvantage in the atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion that has been fostered by Lotho, Grima and Sharkey. It seems likely that ruffians will be sent to drag you to the lock-holes before too long. Tookland is still free; best light out for the border country of Tuckborough for a while and plot an uprising.

This will be a guerrilla campaign or skirmish, illustrating the conflicts occurring before the Fellowship return and cleanse The Shire. The return of the Fellowship and their re-establishment of the old order (or ushering in of a new) marks the conclusion of the campaign. Players have choice to continue with more standard adventures or wrap things up.

Adolescence and your Hobbit

All hobbits get +11% to their Cookery and +8% to their Silent Move Rural. They should pick a career, which gives them an advance scheme. They receive 1 free advance of +1 or +10, and a base +5% in all career skills (Servant or Student: pick 4 - other optional skills: only if percentage chance is 50% or above). They then add their base Dex, Ld, Int, Cl, WP and Fel together, and DIVIDE BY 2. This gives the number of points to divide amongst their new and old skills and abilities. Special abilities may be bought at a cost of 20; Advances in profile or non-career skills may be bought at a 2 for 1 or 20 for 1 rate.

From the Warhammer FPG rules, crowns become shillings, and shillings pennies. Firearms become Crossbows. Mail becomes Leather. For languages, Magick = Quenya. Classical = Adunaic. Druidic = Silvan. Elvish = Sindarin. Other Languages available to Hobbits: Dunnish (Similar to Welsh, spoken by some men of Bree and parts to the south).

The social structure of the Shire

The social structure of the Shire is the result of adapting the ancient Hobbits' quasi-nomadic, hunter/gatherer/cultivator lifestyle to the feudal structures demanded by the kingdom of Arthedain in which they settled. Many roles (like that of the chief) were formalised and given new powers, such as the lordship of land, while other traditions were created or strengthened to balance this new hierarchy. For example, the custom of the rich (like Bilbo) giving lavish birthday parties, at which they gave gifts to all comers, could only be created after the adoption of a fixed calendar from the

Dunedain. It did, however, build upon an older tradition of redistribution at feasts.

Shire society can be roughly divided into three classes. There are the land-owning gentry, such as the Tooks, Brandybucks and (Sackville)-Bagginses; independent or rent-paying farmers such as Farmer Maggot or the Hornblowers; and labourers, shopkeepers and artisans like the Gamgees and Cottons. The classes are not highly differentiated and there exists relative wealth and poverty within each group: The Hornblowers, for example, are almost as rich as the Bagginses due to their pre-eminence in the lucrative pipeweed trade. Generally, however, the land-owning class are the richest due to their income from rent.

This privileged position comes with many important social checks and balances. Groups such as the Tooks are expected to provide or pay for much of the "civil service" of the Shire (at least in their folklands), including the upkeep of roads, the running of the postal service, reading and writing letters, family trees and legal documents for those who require it, arbitrating disputes, serving as or paying for the Bounders and Sheriffs, and providing front-line leadership in the case of an emergency - some elderly hobbits can still remember the Fell Winter and white wolves of 90 years past.

The gentry are also expected to support those in their folklands, both in general through the holding of birthday parties, banquets, fairs, festivals, etc, and to provide work for the idle and relief for the impoverished. The Mayor, who is usually from the artisan or farming classes, is an important figure because of his role in organising such events; so saying that the Mayor's major role is to "preside at banquets" is a polite way of saying that he represents the interests of the commons to the gentry and prods them to fulfil their obligations. Of course there are always those (such as Otho Sackville-Baggins and his son Lotho) who seek to take without giving. They usually find, however, that the social odium, bad service and inflated prices they attract are not worth the extra rent. It is something of a mystery why Otho has successfully remained a stingy old miser long enough to pass these tendencies on to his son. Hobbits in general lack the ruthlessness and drive for power that led to the wholesale exploitation and eviction of the European feudal peasantry by force and fraud.

Currency: Coinage comes in various shapes and sizes. In general, what is valuable is not the coin but the metal. Thus it is quite common to pay for more expensive goods or services by , for example, handing over a silver bracelet or ring, and many people melt coins into jewelry for ease of carrying and security, or take jewelry to a dwarven smith to be re-minted when wanted.

Farthings are minted locally in the Shire out of copper, tin and zinc, and are made of bronze or brass. They usually have an image of the Three-Farthing stone on one side and of some other landmark or notable person (e.g. the Mayor, the Thain, the Bywater Bridge) upon the other. The farthing is about the size of a 5 cent coin and weighs about 4 grams.

Ha'pennies, threefarthings, pennies, half-groats, thripences, groats (fourpences), sixpences and shillings are made from silver mixed with copper to varying degrees. A penny is about half the size of a farthing, because of the valuable silver, and weighs about 2 grams. Shilling coins are about 20 grams in weight, 3 cm across, are quite thick and are almost pure silver. They are quite uncommon. These coins are all minted outside the shire by Dwarves (with the occasional Gondorian or other exotic Mannish kingdom pieces drifting in sometimes). Pennies and other coins of lesser denomination are minted for the Shire trade and thus have similar images on them. Larger coins often have the image of Thror the Old or Dain II Ironfoot, or less often Thrain II, Thorin II Oakenshield, or less known Dwarfs on one side, and the anvil, crown and stars of the House of Durin on the other.

More valuable coins are made of gold and silver alloys (electrum). Their use is quite rare. The most common coins are the fools crown (2 shillings 6 d) half crown (5 shillings) and crown (10 shillings). A gold crown is about 6 grams with a diameter of about 3 cm. The half crown and fools crown are proportional. These coins are also dwarvish. Rarest is the pure gold Sovereign, or double crown (20 shillings). It weighs about 12 grams and is about 4 cm across. It has a figure of a human king, "The King", on one side and a Crown and Sceptre upon the other. It is worth 240 pennies, or one pound (480 g) of silver.

White Hand Rising: An Alternative Beginning to the Fourth Age

by Lev Lafayette

"The Elder Days are gone. The Middle Days are passing. The Younger Days are beginning. The time of the Elves is over, but our time is at hand: the world of Men, which We must rule. But we must have power, power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see..." Saruman in The Fellowship of the Ring [1]

Thematic Differences

The standard plot trajectory of the conclusion of the Lord of the Rings is very well known: an alliance of Gondor and Rohan fight against Sauron's forces whilst Frodo destroys the One Ring. With the destruction of the One Ring, the power of Sauron is lost, the Wraiths vanish and his leaderless armies are scattered or destroyed. Aragon is crowned King of Gondor and becomes King Elessar, marries Arwen, reunites the Kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor, with the imaginative name "The Reunited Kingdom" (somehow Rohan remains independent) and apart from a mopping up scenario of Sharkey née Saruman everyone live happily ever after.

Many Fourth Age roleplaying stories are based on this standard plot, whereby characters are involved in a theme of recovering civilisation after a period of great evil, investigating and destroying remaining pockets of fell beings as a standard scenario. A story that involves the Dwarves repopulating Khazad Dum is an obvious example. Such proposals have some validity with Tolkien himself. Michael Martinez, for example makes reference to the beginning of a story by Tolkien entitled "The New Shadow", a thriller based one hundred years after the War of the Ring, involves a cult plotting to overthrow Eldarion [2]; reference in this context can also be made to the Total War computer game module of the same name.

The Fourth Age setting and narrative presented for "White Hand Rising" is significantly different to this standard. Thematically, it is very different to Tolkien, who largely emphasised a traditional moral battle between good and evil, but also a superiority of romanticised magical naturalism over the pragmatic realism of industrial modernism of which the second-last chapter of the Lord of the Rings, *The Scourging of the Shire*, serves as a potent metaphor. Here, the first theme is neutralised and the second is reversed. The eternal battle between traditionalist good and evil is fought to an exhausting standstill and arguably because neither side understands the "new power" which has arisen in the West, the power of modernism, the power of industry - the power of Curunír, the man of skill, the man of craft, the one of cunning devices.

The Premise of Failure

The first premise of White Hand Rising is that Frodo does not manage to destroy the One Ring. There are various ways this could occur; perhaps Frodo is corrupted by its power becoming like Gollum, or alternatively, Gollum succeeds in wresting it from him and perhaps kills Frodo in the process. What is essential however is that the power of Sauron remains intact, but not improved; in other words, the status quo expressed throughout the entire Lord of the Rings is, to an extent, retained.

The Battle of the Morannon is theoretically a particular challenge in this scenario. According to the chapter, "The Last Debate"[3] the forces of Gondor and the Rohan number approximately 6,000 footsoldiers and 1,000 cavalry at the outset, left some at the crossroads and arrived at the battle with less than 6,000 in total. The forces facing Aragon's army were "ten times and more than ten times", including a number of Olog-hai. The presence of Ringwraiths also

made matters difficult for the forces of Good, even if there were giant eagles present, although as soon as Sauron realised the presence of the One Ring in Mordor they left the combat. This presents a plot opportunity for the Ring-Bearer - whomever it is - escapes the clutches of the Nazgul, whilst at the same allowing for a reprive for the forces of Rohan and Gondor - an eleventh hour rescue by those at those stationed at the Crossroads or an escape by 'hidden paths and ways' by Faramir's Rangers of Ithilien.

These circumstances set the scene for exposition of the theme of exhaustion between the traditional armies of good and evil. Whilst Mordor commands overwhelming superiority in numbers, the bulk of their forces are ill-trained Orcs and mercenaries from the south and east. The forces of Rohan and Gondor, whilst never having the numbers to engage in a strategic advance, can defend and counter-attack effectively against any salient established by Sauron's troops; an endless cycle of attack, defense and counter-attack establishes itself, as exhausting and with ultimately minimal changes to the front line to western Europe in the First World War. Perhaps, like that war, the ultimate victor will be disease.

The New Setting and Potential Plots

"... there was a whole line of ugly new houses all along Pool Side, where the Hobbiton Road ran close to the bank. An avenue of trees had stood there. They were all gone. And looking with dismay up the road towards Bag End they saw a tall chimney of brick in the distance. It was pouring out black smoke into the evening air." The Scourging of The Shire [4]

Unlike the famous movies of Peter Jackson's direction where the problem of Sauruman is quickly dispensed with in "White Hand Rising" he becomes central to the plot. Forced out of Isengard and Orthanc by the Ents, Saruman and Gríma establish a new base in The Shire, having financed a real estate success of Lotho Sackville-Baggins. In this environment 'Sharkey', begins what can only be described as the beginnings of an industrial revolution in Middle Earth. The Shire itself becomes a "magic suppressed" zone (with the initial exception of the Old Forest of course) as new power establishes a work ethic, encourages the "disenchantment" of the world, and develops technological innovations in the textiles, steam power, iron founding, perhaps even gunpowder, all in addition to the "vat-grown" Uruk-hai and the breeding experiments of the half-orcs. With these new social conditions, new conflicts appear; both Dwarves and Hobbits may approve of the increased productivity but support the establishment of a guild democracy instead of the autocratic Republic of the White Hand.

In relative isolation and with the attention of the world's powers turned to the ongoing struggle between the forces of the Gondor-Rohan alliances against those of Sauron, the new republic of the Shire will have the opportunity to amass a significant force of weapons and soldiers. Initial and rapid expansions taking Bree, Fornost and Tharbad will be trivial. The Republic will also make appeals to the Dwarven peoples on the basis of craftwork, friendship with Hobbits, antipathy against Sauron, and alternatively Elves, and with the possibility of re-establishing the Kingdom of Khazad-Dum. Imagine if you will, a party of Dunlendings, Half-Orcs and Dwarves with the technology of the Republic reclaiming Moria against the forces of Sauron.

When the extent of the Republic's influence becomes evident in the north and faced with the increasing threat from Sauron, it is entirely probable that Aragon and Éowyn will be wed to cement the alliance between those two Kingdoms (and their child will, of course, be ruler of both). This allows for romantic tension between Aragon, Éowyn and Faramir. Éowyn initially desires Aragon, but he only marries her out of interests of state; she rejects Faramir's advances but over time he becomes less of a Steward and more of the Ranger-type that she respects. Éowyn herself will be torn between sterotypical domestic duties and her desires and abilities as a shieldmaiden.

The situation of the Elves is a difficult one, at least for those in Lindon and Rivendell. Too weak and few in number to launch an attack themselves, they have to adopt defensive positions. Pressured on all sides, with pro-Sauron forces remaining in Agmar and the Misty Mountains and with the forces of the White Hand to the west and south, it is entirely possible that Elrond may decide to desert Rivendell (despite the fact that it will be safe "until all else is conquered" [5])

and establish a base on the Grey Havens where the forces of of the Elven ring Vilya will be sufficient to ensure the magical axioms remain dominant and cause any technological devices brought by forces of the White Hand to malfunction. Gondor, or more specifically Minas Tirth although not directly threatened initially by Saruman will have the same effect with Gandalf's Elf-ring, Narya.

"In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!" [6]

With the ring Nenya wielded by Galadriel of Lothlórien, and with the Ents of Fangorn achieving a military victory against Isengard, it is entirely reasonable that under the circumstances they would seek an defensive alliance given their proximity. This alliance could be expanded with the support of Radagast The Brown, protector of nature, the Beornings and the Sylvan Elves of northern Greatwood. In doing so Galadriel could organise the expansion of her realm to East Lothlórien and Southern Greatwood, thus creating a great defensive Elven Queendom which would encompass an enormous forested region. How this Elvish power reacts to the possibility of a new Dwarf kingdom re-establishing itself on its borders via Khazad-Dum is a matter of some interest.

Conclusion

Without a doubt the scenario presented here is radically different to Tolkien's intent and overriding thematic considerations and this will not necessarily appeal to the imagination of many of what the Fourth Age should look like. However it remains within the boundaries of plausibility and also has a consistent theme in its own right and is arguably stronger; for Middle-Earth, as much as it claims that the Fourth Age is the age of man, presents a type of man who is still existing in an idyllic world of magic and elves. True, this anti-modernist romanticism is part of the great appeal of the series but it is not necessarily the only way to present the age. A new power, and new world of conflict may provide roleplayers in the Fourth Age of Middle Earth an unusual set of moral and aesthetic challenges which hitherto have gone quite unnoticed.

[1] The Fellowship of the Ring, Harper Collins edition, 2002, p260
[2] Michael Martinez, Exploring Tolkien's Fourth Age, merp.com, 2000
[3] The Return of the King, Hoghten Mifflin edition, 2001, pp854-865
[4] The Return of the King, Harper Collins edition, 2002, p1016
[5] The Fellowship of the Ring, Harper Collins edition, 2002, p222
[6] The Fellowship of the Ring, Harper Collins edition, 2002, p368

Rolemaster Play By Email

by Luther Martin

Play-by-email (PBEM) games are an increasingly popular alternative to face-to-face gaming. In PBEM games, the gamemaster composes an email that describes what's happening in the game and sends it to the players and gives them a deadline for replying with their characters' actions. The players then reply with one or more messages of their own that describes how their characters react to the situation. Other means of communication like message boards work just as well, of course, but we'll use the term "PBEM" here to cover all such games, even if they're not played over email.

Being a gamemaster in a PBEM game is more difficult than being a player, and most of the comments here are aimed at people thinking about running a PBEM game instead of playing in one. These comments are based on my experience running and playing in several PBEM games over the past 10 years or so and may or may not accurately reflect what works for you.

PBEM games may not be a natural step of the evolution of role-playing games, but they may be a natural step in the evolution of gamers. When you're young, you tend to have lots of free time, but you also tend to not have enough money to do everything that you want to do. Not too many years later, you tend to find that you have enough money to do many of the things that you want to do, but there are so many demands on your time that you no longer have time to do many things that you want to do. When you're younger, finding time to sit down to a face-to-face session of gaming is relatively easy. But when you find that you're time-constrained instead of money-constrained, it gets tougher and tougher to find the time for face-to-face gaming, and PBEM games are a good alternative to try when this happens. It's much easier for a half-dozen time-constrained people to find the time to read and reply to an email than it is for the same group to be able to find a time when they can all sit down for a gaming session.

Playing a PBEM game involves reading and writing. Most people don't find reading too difficult, but they also seem to lose interest after roughly 500 words. This means that if you're the gamemaster of a PBEM game, you should probably try to include the most important information in the first 500 words of a post where they're more likely to be read. And because people tend to not ask for clarification or additional detail as much in a PBEM game as they would if they were playing face to face, you can't assume that players will pick up subtle clues. This means that you often need to be much more direct in a PBEM game than you would be if you were playing face to face. Writing can be deceptively difficult and time-consuming, and many people who think about running or playing in a PBEM game find it a bit overwhelming. If you find the prospect of writing a 500-word essay daunting, then you might want to get more practice writing before running a PBEM game. That's roughly what a typical game turn involves if you're the gamemaster of a PBEM game.

Many players also find writing daunting, so it's often useful to award posts by in-game character advancement. Having characters advance a level after eight to ten weekly posts, for example, seems to work fairly well. This encourages players to create and post a contribution to the game turn, most of which end up making the game much better than it would have been without them. And allowing a week between turns seems to work best. A shorter time between turns means that people will miss turns more often due to the inability to find the time to read and reply to a turn. A longer time between turns seems to cause people to lose interest.

The increased difficulty of communication in PBEM games also means that games set in well-known and well-developed worlds tend to work better than games set in other settings. The common background that an established setting provides means that you can devote more of the limited space that each turn provides to moving the game forward instead of providing background information. If your game is set in Middle-earth, for example, then most people know what Dwarves, Elves and Orcs look like and how they tend to behave, so you don't need to spend time on telling players this. Most people also know roughly what's involved in a journey from Rivendell to Lorien, so you won't need to describe what options are open to characters, how long the various alternatives will take, how dangerous

they are, and so on.

So if you've decided to try a PBEM game and have decided the setting for the game, the next step is to decide which set of rules to use. In my experience, *Rolemaster* works very well for this, perhaps better than any other system. My personal biases definitely influence this opinion, but it's also based on what systems I have seen work well or not work well in PBEM games.

I like to see characters develop skills that they actually use in the course of a game, and *Rolemaster* provides a good framework for doing this. It's much like seeing Conan learn to speak the various languages of the Hyborian world and to use the weapons native to each Hyborian kingdom over the course of his adventures. He learns to speak Aquilonian through his adventures in Aquilonia, and he learns to use the Hyrkanian bow through his adventures in Hyrkania. I like seeing that type of character development and *Rolemaster* seems to provide a good framework with which to do it.

Rolemaster's combat system is also fairly abstract, at least when compared to some of the more modern alternatives. Abstraction is necessary in a PBEM game because you can't describe everything in detail. This means that rules that work well with a fair amount of abstraction and ambiguity work well in PBEM games. Some rules are essentially designed to be used with miniatures and have rules that really require looking at the placement of the miniatures to determine exactly what can and can't happen in the game. These tend not to work as well in PBEM games unless you have a way for both the gamemaster and the players to accurately shown exactly where each character and their opponents are. Players familiar with mechanics involving miniatures also tend to get frustrated when the ability to use miniatures disappears.

Rolemaster also works fairly well without too many house rules. This is particularly useful in PBEM games where it's more difficult for players to remember exactly what all of your house rules are. It's probably better to just use the rules as they are written, even if they don't always make as much sense as they could. If you follow the rules, then you at least have a common framework that's easily agreed upon, even if it doesn't always make as much sense as it could.

Once you have a PBEM game going, you'll have one more challenge: getting players to continue in the game. It's not uncommon in PBEM games to have half of the players drop out in the first few weeks. Some probably find that they really don't like having to write. Others may find that the game takes more time than they expected. Even others will find that they just don't like your game for some reason. Maybe you have a rigorous by-the-book style and they prefer a more laid back style. Or maybe you have a laid back style and they prefer a more by-the-book style. Maybe they didn't like the direction the game was going in. Maybe they just didn't have time to participate due to unexpected real-life events. Unfortunately, most of the people who will drop out won't tell you that they're going to quit or why they've decided to quit. Don't take it personally when this happens.

And because real-life events do affect the ability of players to contribute to PBEM games from time to time, it's probably a good idea to do your best to make sure that keeping the game going doesn't depend too much on the actions of a single character.

Finally, realize that in a PBEM game it can take months to accomplish what could easily be done in a few hours of face-to-face gaming. An adventure that could be easily finished in one or two face-to-face sessions can easily take a year or more to finish if it's done in a PBEM game, so don't try to get too ambitious with what you plan to accomplish in a PBEM game.

If you find that you don't have the time for face-to-face gaming any more and don't mind a bit of writing, why not dust off those *Rolemaster* books and try playing a game over email? It's a different experience than face-to-face gaming, but one that can be just as fun. After all, how many face-to-face games leave you with a written record of everything that happened that you can look back at several years later?

Grey Ranks: Roleplaying the Szare Szeregi

by Lev Lafayette

Historical Context

Grey Ranks (Szare Szeregi) was the codename for the Polish Scouting Association during Nazi occupation in World War II. Yes, scouts; a bunch of teenagers who actively fought against the occupation, from the auxiliary services performed by those aged 12 to 14, surveillance, sabotage and propaganda by those 15-17, and an assault group from those aged 17 and more who were under directory subordinate to the Polish Home Army. Their actions included liberation of prisoners by assaults on transports, major sabotage on bridges, railroads etc, and highly significant involvement in the Warsaw uprising.

So Jason Morningstar has both the historical nous, the moral courage and the mind to try to pitch this as a roleplaying game. If the setting does not evoke beer and pretzels by any stretch of imagination, then wait until you get into actual play. Published by Bully Pulpit Games, *Grey Ranks* recently won the 2008 Diana Jones award. Available in print and PDF, it's 149 pages in total with single-column and sidebars with cartoon images. There's an extensive table of contents for the six chapters, a good index, and a clear, serif font used throughout, although it's overly generous on the white space, and advertisements for other games are off-putting. There is a handful of abhorrent quotes by Hans Frank, the Governor General of occupied Poland. The game is designed, and is best run, with four players. There is no gamesmaster, with NPC parts played by the players as well. The game should take approximately ten hours in total to play; or three sessions. The text is reasonably well-written, with plenty of in-play examples.

In the game you start as a Polish partisan before, during, and after the (failed) 1944 uprising for a total of sixty-three days. Each of the chapters relates to a specific date in 1944 starting with Radio Lightning broadcasts; in other words, you can play as you read. As the game progresses, success will become increasingly difficult, and characters will find themselves torn between their personalities and the situation. Understandably, this is a setting and game of strong emotional content. It is recommended that your group works out beforehand what topics - if anything - you're not going to address in actual play.

This is An Indie, Narrativist Game

If indie, narrativist games aren't your idea of fun, you'll probably will find the rule system of *Grey Ranks* a little strange. Characters do not have stats or skills in the traditional RPG method. But you do have plot devices, a personality status, and the game comes with an inbuilt mechanism for raising the stakes of the narrative and for ensuring dramatic tension.

The other matter worth noting is that on first appearances it seems that *Grey Ranks* is prone to a great deal of meta-game discussion, and the examples in the text do not do a great deal to dispel this illusion. However, it is nevertheless an illusion. The point of the game is not necessarily the individual character behaving in role, but rather the collaborative process of script-writing. One does not have to be deeply immersed in the individual role as such, but rather in the story at unfolds; it still works in the mind's eye, it is still an immersive orientation.

Your Character

The game starts in July 1944, with the Nazis being defeated on both fronts. The Uprising is coming; only a month away, a planned week-long struggle to free Warsaw before the Russians arrive; the execution of 27,000 Polish officers, priests and intellectuals by the Soviets at Katyn Forest in 1943 is still a fresh memory. The Home Army wanted to meet the Russians on their own terms.

In the Uprising, the Polish Home Army managed to gain control of several sectors of central Warsaw by August 1944.

Hitler's response was to order the city to be razed to the ground, and an overwhelming campaign of civilian executions began. As August became September, the Home Army was reduced to holding Wola, Old Town and some small pockets. The Soviets had arrived, but stopped their advanced only a hundred meters away; they refused permission to the British and Americans to use their fields or airspace. In early October, the city fell. Two-hundred thousand civilians had died and Hitler had the city emptied. By the time the Soviets took over in January 1945, Warsaw had been completely destroyed.

Player Characters from an operational unit, known as "bees" or a crew. All the bees in a neighbourhood or village are a "swarm" and all in a city, a "beehive". There are twenty beehives in occupied Poland, connected by young couriers. Player Characters belong to "Battle Schools", the second group of the Grey Ranks. They are not supposed to engage in armed combat, but rather propaganda and sabotage. The age of a character is chosen between 15, 16 or 17, a neighbourhood home is chosen, sex, a name and a pseudonym.

Perhaps the most important component in Grey Ranks is the Grid, which tracks the mental and emotional state of the character. Initial placement on the grid indicates the character type and what danger confronts them. Outgoing patriots are close to martyrdom; intellectual, religious and shy characters are closest to a nervous breakdown, outspoken, aggressive characters are close to derangement; and pessimistic loners are closest to suicide.

Chapters

The game begins with each player picking up a Situation Element for their character, chosen from a fixed list for the first chapter. At the end of the first chapter, you have "character development". In this case, that means the player assigns a unique "Thing You Hold Dear" attribute, and the other players determine your character's two "Reputations", based on what their characters think they did. Finally, as a group, each player creates an extra with a single word unique Reputation. The Thing You Hold Dear can introduced as an advantage three times during play; the first time it is invoked, the second threated, the third destroyed. "Things" can include aspects of Faith, Country, City, Family, Friends, and First Love. With regard to Reputation, the characters will begin with negative Reputations as awkward teenagers (Ugly, Clumsy, Weak, Timid, Careless, Excitable etc), but will have these transform rapidly into positives. No dice are involved in the first (and last) chapters.

Each subsequent chapter begins with a reading of Radio Lightning and a choice of Situation Element. Each player will take a reputation die and a grid die, varying from a d4 to a d12. The crew then chooses a mission leader, who selects a mission, rolls dice for the Mission Pool (against a target number of the chapter times number of players) and also singles someone out at the end of a chapter, who moves two grid positions. Each player selects a personal scene for their character an allocates a die to it, and then selects a mission scene for another character. For the mission scene, narrate according to the die size allocated. Note that the Reputation or Grid die can be allocated to either the Personal or Mission Scene. This helps creates the tension between the character's personal goals and their mission goals. The Reputation die can upgraded at any time; to a d6, d8 etc. but this is a one-use resource and must be applied sequentially.

Successfully resolving a personal scene (a roll over the chapter number) means the player can shift their character's grid position towards the 'enthusiasm' and 'success' edges. A failure, means movement towards the 'hate' and 'exhaustion' edges. A tie can be either, depending on the player's choice. Somewhat counter-intuitive, the smaller the die offered in Mission Scenes, the greater the individual success. The overall success or failure however is collective; individual successes can lead to enormous collective failures. Individual suffering and sacrifice can lead to collective successes..

The final step in every chapter is to move the character's position on the Grid. The position on the Grid determines the die they will use in the subsequent chapter, as well as the table from which they will draw their Situation Element. Success and failure on the two missions will move the character appropriately. For example, win a personal scene, but lose the mission, moves the character towards Enthusiasm; lose a personal and mission scene moves the character

towards Hate. Edges are extremes of personality; Corners are destructive and characters who must move can go from one corner to another (e.g., from matyrdom to derangement) which isn't pretty. A character who visits the same corner twice is written out of the story.

Excellence

Grey Ranks is a very good game. It is an awesome (and terrible) setting, with excellent characterisation, a high-tragic narrative, and an easy rules system which is makes sense in the circumstances. It *is* very heavy on the meta-gaming aspect, but this largely works because it concentrates on the story development rather than the system elements (although the way the system elements work is often a pleasant surprise). Whilst presented as an RPG wrapped into a scenario, the core system could easily be taken and utilised in other settings where the characters have a personal agenda which can conflict dangerously with their mission success. The Diana Jones award was accurate and fair. *Grey Ranks* really is an outstandingly creative game.

Eeeasy does it... How am I going to disarm this thing?
Should I remove the *red* cog wheel, or the *green* one?
Dammit, Riggs, talk to me!

Dragon Warriors: A New Era?

by Lev Lafayette

Dragon Warriors is an old school level-and-class system which published in a series of six semi-modula novella-sized books in the mid-1980s by Corgi. I have recently reviewed the old classic on RPG.net with the impending publication of a new edition (http://www.rpg.net/reviews/archive/14/14027.phtml). The game came with 3d6 randomly determined ability scores for Strength, Reflexes, Intelligence and Looks, the latter two having a pretty minimal influence on the system. The Professions were Knight, Barbarian, Sorcerer, Mystic, Assassin, Elementalist and Warlock (fighter-mage). Character abilities included Health, Attack, Defense, Magical Attack, Magical Defense, Evasion, Stealth and Perception, with a range of skills available for the assassin (only- although some of these have been expanded to other classes in the latest edition) . At higher levels most classes receive additional abilities. Most ability checks are made on 2d10, whereas attack rolls made on d20. There was a general gain of x per level in the various abilities which had a somewhat wonky scale. There were no general skill system as such, no rules for changing class and a combat system which was about as complex as OD&D.

You may be forgiven for thinking that this is not a particularly great game; and on the areas just described it really isn't. It's a rules-light system that mostly hangs together, and quite well too (a first rank DW character is more liable to survive than a first level D&D character; but a Rank 10 DW character is more 'realistic' than a Level 10 D&D character). But that is not all there is to *Dragon Warriors*. The magic system, at least for Sorcerers and Mystics is colourful. Sorcerers have a number of magic points per day, whereas a Mystic must make a psychic fatigue check on each casting. A miscast sorcerer spell means that double magic points are lost *and* a random spell of the same level is cast instead. Magical attack spells require a Magic Defense check, whereas magical elemental attacks (e.g., firebolt) require an Evasion check.

Taking the game up even a further notch is the setting, the World of Legend, gradually introduced in the Dragon Warriors core books, especially the original Book 6: The Lands of Legend, and in the Bloodsword gamebooks published by Knight Books in the mid-late 80s. It is essentially analogous to a dark medieval Europe, with creepy faeries, politics and intrigue, a True Faith, residual paganism, Khanates to the east, Caliphates to the south, and a Crusade against a Infidel in a Holy Land. The level of detail provided in The Lands of Legend is particularly impressive, with a sense of otherworldly and dangerous magic, a detailed language tree, crime, punishment and status, craft professions and travel.

Where the game really shines is in the scenarios. Each of these was really something quite special, quite magical and usually with historical and thematic consideration. Whilst often of the dungeon-delving ilk, albeit balanced by wilderness journeys, even then there was excellent attention to the 'monster ecology' to ensure that the environment did make sense. There is invariably a second-agenda occurring and the PCs will often feel like they are pawns in a larger game (indeed, in one scenario they can literally achieve this status). So take this in order; the strength of *Dragon Warriors* is the scenarios first, the world second, the magic third and the system last.

Now Magnum Opus Press has co-published a new edition of *Dragon Warriors* with Flaming Cobra, a part of Mongoose Publishing. A 256p core rulebook has been released, which includes the seven character classes, "a complete description" of the gameworld, spells, magic items and monsters, the rulesystem and a new introductory adventure. From the samples viewed, the art is pretty damn fine as well. A softcover Bestiary has also been released and two books of linked scenarios (*Sleeping Gods* and *The Elven Crystals*) are also planned. With good fortune, attention to narrative, setting and theme and with a sense of style it can certainly be hoped that these will be as good as the originals, because there's certainly a high bar to reach.

Diseases In Dragon Warriors

by Wayne Imlach

Disease

At the start of each month a character must roll equal to or under their highest Physical Attribute (Strength, Reflexes or Looks) on 2d10 to avoid illness. If the roll is failed, the character will be infected by a disease sometime in the next 30 days (a 1d6 x5 will suffice as a random method of determining the day). On that day, depending on the player's general location, roll 3d6 on the appropriate chart:

Surface Disease Chart (Cities, Towns, Countryside etc.)

02	Pneumonic Plague (The Black Death)
03-04	Red Plague (Smallpox)
05-06	The Ague (Malaria)
07-08	The Bloody Flux (Dysentery)
09-11	Common Cold
12-13	Influenza
14-15	Typhoid Fever
16-17	Typhus (Camp Fever)
18	Bubonic Plague (Black Death)

Underworld Disease Chart (Tombs, Dungeons, Caves etc.)

02	Bubonic Plague (Black Death)
03-06	The Ague (Malaria)
07-13	The Bloody Flux (Dysentery)
14-17	Typhus (Camp Fever)
18	Bubonic Plague (Black Death)

The Recovery Roll

Often the player must make recovery rolls during the term of the illness. Roll less than or equal to Strength, Reflexes or Looks (whichever is higher) on 1d20. When to make these rolls is detailed in the disease description. While suffering from a short term, active disease a character does not heal as usual. Once free of disease (or the disease becomes dormant), lost attributes will return at 1 point per attribute per day. Health points will return as normal, after the usual 4 day rest period. Some loses may be permanent. These can only be reversed with magic.

Incubation

Once caught, some diseases will take time before becoming 'active'. Normally diseases are not contagious until active. Chance of Infection
Remaining in the presence of an infected person increases the risk of also catching the illness.

Each day contact is made with an infected person, roll the die indicated in the disease description.
1. If the contact was brief (an hour or less), the disease is contracted on the roll of a 1.
2. If the contact is prolonged (more than an hour), the disease is contracted on the roll of a 1 or a 2.
3. If the contact is intimate, the disease is contracted on the roll of a 1, 2 or 3.

Assume the disease must be active to be infectious, unless noted otherwise in the disease description. Note that some diseases can only be caught through intimate contact – in these cases no roll is required for brief or prolonged contact.

The Diseases

Common Cold

Transmission: Through saliva and mucus, either airborne particles or direct contact.
Infection: 1d8
Incubation: 1d4 days.
Symptoms: Runny nose, cough and general aches.
Effects:
Aside from the loss of 1 Looks, no other direct penalties are applied other than feeling miserable.
The cold clears up on a successful recovery roll, made each morning after the disease has been contracted.

The Bloody Flux (Dysentery)

Transmission: Food or water contaminated by micro particles of faeces from an infected host, as well as direct contact.
Infection: 1d12
Incubation: 1d6 days
Symptoms: Profuse and bloody diarrhoea, fever and stomach pain. Dehydration.

Effects:
First Day: Lose 1 HP. Lose 1 Looks.
Each Day Thereafter: Each morning make a recovery roll. A failure results in the loss of 1 HP, and the check must be made again the following day. A successful roll sees the illness disappear by early afternoon. No more checks need to be made.
While suffering from dysentery sudden attacks of diarrhoea are common. During any strenuous activity, roll a 1d20. On a roll of 1-3 the Bloody Flux strikes and the character will have that many rounds to prepare themselves for the deluge. After such attacks the characters looks score is reduced to 1 and Stealth is halved versus any creature with a nose. This temporary penalty persists until they can clean themselves up.

Influenza

Transmission: Through saliva, mucus, blood or faeces, either airborne particles or direct contact.
Infection: d8
Incubation: 1d2 days
Symptoms: High temperature, light fever. Coughing and sneezing. Body and head aches.
Effects:
First Day: Lose 1 Reflexes, Strength, Looks and HP.
Second Day: Lose 1 Reflexes, Strength, Looks and HP.
Each Day Thereafter: Each morning make a recovery roll. A failure results in the loss of 1 HP, and the check must be made again the following day. A successful roll sees the illness disappear by early afternoon. No more checks need to be made.

The Ague (Malaria)

Transmission: Spread by bites from infected mosquitoes.
Infection: Not applicable (see transmission).
Incubation: 1d4 weeks.
Symptoms: Anaemia, high fever, chills and shivering, nausea.

Effects:
First Day: Lose 1 Reflexes, Strength, Looks and 1d4 HP.
Second Day: The disease will subside. A successful recovery roll sees the illness go into remission and disappear. Otherwise it will surface again the following day.
Third Day: Lose 1 Reflexes, Strength, Looks and 1d4 HP.

Fourth Day: The disease will subside. A successful recovery roll sees the illness go into remission and disappear. Otherwise it will surface again the following day.

This cycle of alternate days of illness and recovery continues until a successful recovery roll is made, or the victim dies from complications.

Typhoid Fever
Transmission: Food or water contaminated by micro particles of faeces from an infected host, as well as direct contact.
Infection: 1d12
Incubation: 3d20days
Symptoms: Fever, diarrhoea, profuse sweating, intense headaches.

Effects:
First Week: Light temperature, malaise, headache and cough. Aside from the loss of 1 Looks, no other direct penalties other than feeling miserable.
Second Week: High fever, diarrhoea. Each day of the week lose 1 Strength, Reflexes and Intelligence.
Third Week: Continued high fever and diarrhoea. Delirium. Lose 1 HP each day, and 1 Intelligence and Looks every second day.
Each Day Thereafter: Temperature, malaise, headache and cough. Each day make a recovery roll. A failure results in the loss of 1 HP. Success shakes the final stages of the illness and a full recovery is made.

Typhus (Camp Fever)
Transmission: Infected human body lice.
Infection: 1d12
Incubation: 3d6 days
Symptoms: Severe headache, high fever, cough, rash, muscle pain.
Effects:
First Week: Fever, headache and cough. A pink rash appears over the body (all areas except face, palms and soles), becoming redder as the illness progresses. Lose 1d4 Strength, 1d4 Reflexes, 1d4 Intelligence and 1d4 HP (taking 1 point per day, per attribute until the full penalties have been applied).
Each Day Thereafter: Fever, malaise, headache and cough. Each day make a recovery roll. A failure results in the loss of 1 HP. On success the disease has run its course.

Red Plague (Smallpox)
Transmission: Airborne, or via direct contact.
Infection: 1d6
Incubation: 3d6 days
Symptoms: These vary over the course of the disease, and are outlined in the effects below.
Effects:
First Day: Slight temperature. Aside from the loss of 1 Looks, no other direct penalties other than feeling miserable.
Second Day: High temperature, light fever. Body and head aches. Lose 1 Reflexes, Strength and HP.
Third Day: High temperature, light fever. Body and head aches. Lose 1 Reflexes, Strength, Looks and HP.
Fourth Day:Small reddish spots begin to appear on the tongue and in the mouth. Lose 1 HP.
Fifth Day: Mouth spots become sores, finally breaking open. Lose 1 Looks and 1 HP.
Sixth Day: Rash rapidly spreads outward across head, body and finally limbs. Temperature abates.
Seventh Day: Rash becomes raised bumps, filling with a thick opaque liquid. Fever returns. Lose 1 Reflexes, Strength, Looks and and HP. Bumps become pustules.
Eighth Day: The pustules begin to form a crust and then scab. High Fever. Lose 1 Reflexes, Strength, Looks and HP.
Every four days thereafter: Make a recovery roll. A failure results in the loss of 1 HP. Success takes the victim to the final day of the disease.
Final Day: Fever abates completely. Scabs begin to fall off, leaving permanent pitted scars. Lose 1 Looks *permanently* - this is not recovered as usual during the recovery process.

Clyster, A Dragon Warriors PBeM
by He Blackarm

The Dragon Warriors gamesystem has survived, believe it or not, from its pre-Dungeons and Dragons popularity through its winter to the new season of release this year via Mongoose games. Not only has a dedicated Yahoo! group kept the flame alive for those interested through to those playing at home or via online play-by-email, but also generated a restricted-access wiki for gamesmasters for custom additions to the game.

One Play-By-Email game is DW-Clyster, a campaign set in the port city of Clyster in North-eastern Albion. Run by a GM who goes by the pseudonym ... GM! ..., he explains that he much prefers PBEM. "I'm a busy guy, with young kids", he begins, "At first, via an old DW-friend who told me about the Yahoo! group, I joined a PBEM campaign run by Nim daSilva. I enjoyed that a lot, and thought - hey I could do this too! I'd usually been lumped with being a GM and as someone with an interest in writing fantasy, figured this would be a good outlet and escape. It's been a blast. One of the many benefits of PBEM is that you don't necessarily have to have the campaign mapped out from start to end - the reactions of players and rolls, and the natural lagtime, allows you to custom the campaign as things develop. I use the campaign to trial some of the custom professions and rule interpretations people have come up with on the private Wiki.

The GM went on to explain PBEM's merits over, say, World of Warcraft: "I know myself too well. If I got started on a MMPORPG like WOW, I'd get hooked and never do anything else in life, neglecting my kids, marriage and work. If you know of or look up and watch a satirical take on WOW called The Guild on YouTube, you get the idea. DW PBEM is very appealing to a busy guy because the lag time for other players to act lets the campaign run at the average pace of what others can manage. If you're trying to go too fast, you're probably putting too much time into the game. For busy guys - and girls I suppose! - PBEM is a fine compromise on the sensory and time all-consuming MMPORPG. Besides, I far prefer to imagine rather than have things imagined for me .... and DW PBEMs are FREE!"

The following is summary of the PBEM to date;

The initial adventurers in the Clyster-based Dragon Warriors role-playing group met in the prison-yard of the Clyster City Guard on trumped up charges of being a 'guildmaster'. Aided by the unfortunate Hood, they were released but not without Hood himself being crucified at Hell Gate for being Master of the Assassin's Guild. Hood's means of securing the group's release was to link them up with Master Tauto Goizen, one of the merchant Goizen brothers, who needed mercenaries to run through the mining settlements of the Hourla Hills. Goizen bailed the PCs as a downpayment on their services.

Early into the caravan's expedition in the Hourla Hills north of the city, and after slaying the ogre and his orc allies at Grudthak's Pass, Master Goizen espied in his looking glass trouble at far away Maunderlak Castle to the north. The group divided into a scouting group to Maunderlak, and the remaining mercenaries with the caravan.

The Maunderlak group, guided by the boy goatsherd Torin, found their way down through the hills to Maunderlak and discovered a Mercanian raid upon the castle was afoot. Using powerful arbalests, the scouting group picked off raiders until riders emerged from the castle and bid the group join their rearguard assault on the raiders. Four agreed, the remaining two (the Nomad brothers Gunthar and Arok) providing missile cover for the four. The four – the knight Foske Pryde, the mysterious Zhang Jun Bao, the warrior-woman Jadel and the Cornumbrian Cathal An Laimh – were all slain; Gunthar and Arok fled.

As for the Goizen group, they encountered varying hospitality at the mining settlements as Master Goizen did his trade. At St Petra's Mine during the night the group was besieged by orcs but after some heroics from the barbarians Rogue

Blade and Goizen's right-hand-man, Mutu, as well as unorthodox swordsmanship from the sorcerer Simon of Clyster, the siege was rapidly broken and the attackers repelled. Disgruntled miners from Gunthir's Rise then ambushed the group on the last day of their mission, which was also repelled and the leader Herngir FitzGerald captured – though the sorcerer Alaric Lebbeus was felled but later recovered.

The Goizen group returned to Clyster to find Arok, Gunthar and Torin already back and waiting for them at the Headless Orc Inn (18/3/993). As they toasted the memories of their fallen comrades, two new members joined the group – the knight Maidulph and the distant cousin of Zhang Jun Bao, naming himself 'Johnston', who had journeyed a long way seeking tidings of his lost relative. The group resolved to return to the scene of Herngir's ambush, as at that time the mystic Aelgar had sensed some evil that had temporarily drawn them away from the caravan when the ambush occurred.

Finding a cave with a submersible entrance, two Cornumbrian travellers emerged from the undergrowth, having been watching it at that time. They were Haraigh An Laimh and Seamus. Arok remained with Torin and Seamus with the horses whilst Haraigh joined the others in the caves. Alaric was felled and rendered unconscious and had to be carried about, then left guarded by Rogue. Later, Gunthar was slain in a major encounter with skeletons. In an encounter in one chamber of the mines, a hag is encountered - which Luxiex slays in the transformed shape of a bat. Thereafter sustaining considerable wounds, the group retreated out of the mines back to St Petra's Mines, with which some of the group were familiar from their run through there with Master Goizen.

Whilst at St Petra's Mines, a burly forester-turned-miner called Thorne linked up with the group, deciding that mining was not for him after all. Reinforced, the group returned to the mines however reanimated skeletons and killed Rogue died whilst securing the entry point into the mines. Undeterred the heroes pressed further into the mines and discovered a dungeon, there encountering numerous reanimated elf and orc zombies. With injuries too great, and despite the supernatural urging of strange elvish apparitions, the group abandoned the dungeon - which saw it collapse around them, the group escaping just in time. It is then that the players discover a magical time-lapse has occurred and whilst they were in the dungeon only some hours, in fact some days have passed. Another curious effect of the dungeon was to relieve ailments and cure disabilities, which had seen Luxiex for a time appear as a handsome, restored knight - this ceased however when the group abandoned the dungeon.

The day after their return to Clyster, Arok and Maidulph visit whores in south-eastern Clyster whilst others did trade throughout and beyond the city, selling antiquities they had scavenged from the previous dungeon (apparently, some elf ruins). That evening, a teenage assassin attacks Alaric and Aelgar's quarters, slaying Alaric with poison. A warning note reads "Forget Gulina", Gulina being one of the two women who accompanied half the original group in Master Goizen's trade run through the Hourla Hills north of Clyster - and now a love interest of Aelgar.

Arok and Maidulph do not return from their debauchery after some days the group gaves up waiting for them. The day before, the mysterious Caedmon introduces himself and a knight Sir Alfred the Green and both join the group. This is the first time Haraigh coins the name "Lions of Clyster" for the group. The group decides to obey Alaric's dying words and try to find a Beor Hartmaer in the city of Lakstead to the north. Caedmon recommends a route travelling west to Candleford then up the King's Road past Corvalin Castle to Lakstead. The group spends a night in Candleford hearing tell of the upcoming tourney, then ride to Corvalin Castle the next day. There they meet the steward of the castle, Captain Marshall, and are equipped for the dangerous ride along the supply road to Lakstead....

Movie Review; Hellboy II: The Golden Army

by Andrew Moshos

I usually give Del Toro respect for his Spanish films which have all been great (*Cronos, Devil's Backbone, Pan's Labyrinth*), and derision for his Hollywood flicks (*Blade II, the first Hellboy*). Perhaps I'm feeling more forgiving, or perhaps Del Toro is starting to meld the two ways of working into a workable whole. Whatever the reason, or whatever is really going on, I surprised myself by enjoying *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* much more than I thought I would. The main reason I'm surprised is that I really didn't get into the first *Hellboy*, and that one of the main reasons is something that's carried over to this sequel. I'm also a bit burned out by the whole comic book adaptation thing, and Hellboy is nothing if not a comic book property.

Hellboy (played, I guess, by Ron Perlman) is an actual demon, snatched from the gates of hell by a kindly scientist (John Hurt) when still a baby hellspawn. He grows up to love and protect humanity whilst fighting against supernatural shenanigans that threaten humankind. He is bright red, with ground-down horns, a very large fist, styles his hair like a samurai, smokes cigars and loves kittens. And he loves to fight. So yes, he is perfect comic book fodder. There's not much other depth to it apart from its perfect crystallisation of the nature-nurture argument, and is mostly an excuse for having a big red guy fuck shit up old school. Supernatural shit at that.

The biggest problem I've had with Del Toro's films in English is that they're pretty juvenile. Because of the strong contrast between the complexity of his better films in Spanish, I have to believe that he feels his Hollywood bill paying films need to be monstrously dumbed down. With the Hellboy adaptations, apart from the juvenile storytelling, the single biggest problem for me has been how they put the character together.

I mean the actual physical character trying to act and deliver lines. I love Ron Perlman, but clearly he can't do much under layers and layers of red latex, to the point where he can't even speak. He literally can't deliver the lines. The mouth can't move to form the goddamn lines. They compensate by filming him from the side, from the back, from any goddamn angle so that they don't have to admit that he's not actually talking. In the realm of cinematic wizardry, we accept a lot of stuff that our disbelief doesn't generally allow, because we've become accustomed to it. I have far more difficulty accepting a character that clearly can't talk, despite having a human in the 'suit', than I do with computer

generated characters. I know that dubbing, looping, all sorts of stuff occurs to get something to the big screen, but when I'm continually reminded of the fact (as in, I can't forget about it), then it takes me out of the story to a profound degree.

It's the main thing that distracted me in the first flick, apart from the dumb plot and strange dialogue. Here, though, Del Toro aims for something far more complicated and bigger, conceptually, I still never forget that Big Red can't talk. Still, I managed to overcome that fact and enjoy this strange flick. The plot's not much to speak of, but it is a visually splendid trip, and has some great ideas trapped underneath an adolescent story. You get the feeling like the film wants to be an R-Rated flick, but it's obligated to be PG because of the money involved. Then again, *Lord of the Rings* was mostly PG, and it didn't miss out on any ticket sales.

Apparently, thousands of years ago, elves, humans and goblins were fighting nasty wars where people were getting horribly slaughtered. Apparently, the elf king asked a goblin smith to construct a magical army of mechanical constructs who could slaughter things even better than before. Control of this army was given to the elf king, his elf son and his elf daughter. Thousands of years later, as in, in contemporary times, the elf Prince (Luke Goss) wants to get control of this so-called Golden Army in order to slaughter humanity. Hellboy gets involved in this conflict because the government department that both controls him and needs his help against supernatural problems sends him out to deal with stuff when the guests at an auction house get slaughtered by fairies. Yes, fairies. Evil fairies.

A trip to the troll market underneath the Brooklyn Bridge leads Big Red and his people; a fiery pyromaniac (Selma Blair), an amphibian guy (Doug Jones) and a German ectoplasmic ghost in a suit, into a battle to save the World! The Whole World! Not just the wealthy parts of it. The plot doesn't make much sense to me, but it doesn't matter. There is visual stuff aplenty to feast one's eyes upon, which people who've seen *Pan's Labyrinth* (predominately the fantastical bits, not the fascist Captain brutalising people bits), not least of which is the battle with a forest god (!), the denizens of the troll market, the amazing Golden Army itself, and fantasy choreographed fights worthy of something out of a Hong Kong film (with money to burn). And the Angel of Death is… is… pretty amazing.

It looks great, it's well put together, and it did inspire in me a fair few moments of being awe-dumbstruck. Especially the (inexplicable) bit with the forest god, and with a gun battle/baby protection bit worthy of *Hard Boiled.* The problem is that the flick slows down every now and then under the weight of turgid scenes of what passes for melodrama in this flick that really don't go anywhere. The scenes between Hellboy and Pyro Girl fighting about their relationship are excruciating. Flaming Girl Liz (it doesn't help that Selma Blair looks like she is very worn out) stressing about "the future" do not add dramatic depth to her character or to the flick: they just make you grind your teeth. Scenes where Red and the aquatic guy pretend to get drunk are amusing at first and then downright idiotic. But I know what Del Toro was trying to do. He's trying to keep things light but meaningful at the same time. Problem is, it just doesn't work. It's only entertaining when it's moving. Standing still, all you can see is the metaphorical wires, and all you can do is wonder when the next action set piece is going to start. If I want melodrama I'll watch a Mexican soap opera. If I want a relationship flick I'll watch a John Cassavettes or Claude Chabrol flick. Shit, even Woody Allen for crying out loud. The elements don't really cohere, but I didn't mind as much this time. I predominantly think that Del Toro makes his Hollywood flicks deliberately in a manner to showcase what he can do visually in order to get more money for future projects. If he ends up directing *The Hobbit* as is mooted, then it makes perfect sense. The best aspects of *Hellboy II* look like they could have taken place in a nastier, dirtier *Lord of the Rings* flick, to everyone's credit.

There really aren't an abundance of big budget fantasy flicks, despite appearances, these days. Most of them are embarrassing and have cheesy budgets to go with their cheesy effects. The rest are all superhero flicks made with merchandising rights in mind. Yes, *Hellboy* is a comic book property, but I do feel that they were going for something bigger and eclectic here at the same time, even if most of the dialogue really never works. At the very least, they get the look and the scale right. Goddamn, do they get it right. All they need is a lead who can talk.

An expanded version of this review is also available on the author's site, http://movie-reviews.com.au

Random Dungeon Generator
by Peter Cobcroft

The Random Dungeon Generator creates "Rogue-like" maps, like the original Rogue computer game from the 1970s and others such as Nethack and Angbaand. The program i maps just a table with the stats of the tile exits. There is do a loop of random tiles until one matches, after a while it just goes through them sequentially if it can't find a match.

If it goes through all the tiles, it puts a blank. Where possible blanks are replaced by "dead ends" - basically capping tiles of only one column or row. It doesn't do anything fancy like path finding. If one likes they can assume that split maps have secret doors or other forms of concealed passageways that bring the areas together.

The full sourcecode for the generator can be found at the following URL (http://www.curufea.com/games/roguelike/) and the map generator can be executed from (http://www.curufea.com/games/roguelike/map.php).

You can get all the tile images in the source directory, it isn't protected - there's about a thousand files. (http://www.curufea.com/games/roguelike/thumbs)

Visual d20 Combat System (VCS)
by Torquil Gault

If you DM with a laptop, you can have dual monitors, one showing the DM map and the other the player's. You'll be able to 'hide' things and the players will only see what's in range or what they've seen before.

The program has several 'areas' ... these are; Combat, Initiative, Edit, Other, and System.

In the "Combat" section you'll perform all the actions associated with combat - melee, spells, healing etc . The "Initiatives" section - adds player/monster initiatives, sort them etc

The "Edit" allows you to edit or add players and monsters. There is a quick monster section at the bottom where you can add (or edit) standard monsters from the SRD.

Finally, the "Other" section includes Status (overall status of players and monsters), Alerts (add/edi alerts for the DM), Adjustments (things that adjust actions like Bless/Prayer spells), Special Actions (e.g., reset the players back to full 'strength', clear the monsters etc), XP Calc (based on the current (enabled) monsters, how much XP have the players earn), Disable/Enable (allows you to disable or enable for combat groups of monsters), Dice Roller, Auto-Damage, Name Generator (generate some random names) , Mass Skill Check (have a selection of players do a skill check).

The "System" section allows changes to system settings, or to save and load player/monster data. There is also a debug option here.

To run the program, first select "New Round/Initiatives" on the Initiatives tab, set the players initiatives. The initial value is their bonus so add this to their roll. Select "Accept Initiatives"

You will now see a new list in the "Action Initiator Sequence" list of the Combat tab. In the list you will notice several numbers after their name. As players do their action(s), the line in the list will go blue.

If you need to add in a monster during a combat, you will need to do the following:
    add the monster(s) in the Edit tab
    then in Initiatives tab:
        select "Show new monsters/Refresh".
        set the initiative(s)
        select "Accept Initiatives"

 If someone re-focuses or changes their Initiative, do those last 3 steps to update the Initiative sequence

Now start the combat; for each player action select who will be performing an action, from the "Action Initiator" list. Please note that this is just a list and you can select who's doing an action in any order you like. The Action tab below will then display all the relevant info for that action. Any 'Adjustments' that you've entered that effect either of these players will be placed into the various 'Mods' fields. Next, select who's defending against this attack and which weapon they are using. Select any combat modifications applicable to this attack (flanking etc) from the "Combat Mods" list. Make any changes to the roll etc that you require and then press the "CALC" button to see the results of the attack.

Enter in the results of the attack (damage, stun etc) in the appropriate fields. Then press "ACCEPT THIS ATTACK" button. You will notice next to the weapon descriptions are 2 numbers, these are the number of attacks they have with this weapon and how many have been done this round. If you've not done an "Opp. Action" these will be adjusted. Once you've completed all the attacks for that 'player', press the "ALL ATTACKS DONE" button.

Spells are complicated as there are many 'types' of attacks that can be done. First, select the type of spell being cast from "Action Type" list. For example, a Magic Missile would be a Damage spell with "Spell Modifiers" "NO Save" selected, but a Fireball would be a "REF Save" with a "Spell Modifier" of "Save = 50%". Select whom will be effected by the spell from the "Whom it Effects" list & enter the spell's DC. If you have a player who has Spell Resistance, you should get them to roll it FIRST and include them if they fail otherwise exclude them. If it's a monster with SR, if it succeeds then you'll see it removed from the "Whom it effects" list when you press "CALC". Press "CALC" button to see the results of the spell. You will then see the list of 'people' who saved change unless it is a "NO Save" spell when you should just select that option after selecting whom will be effected. All the players should roll their saves and you should de-select those that roll successfully. Enter the results of the spell into the appropriate fields. If you put in a dice roll ie. 2d4+3 into the Damage field, it will roll for each effect person. Then "ACCEPT THIS SPELL" to apply those results. Once you've completed all the spell attacks for that 'player', press the "ALL SPELLS DONE" button.

Actions like healing or stabilizing have no calculation, so select whom will be healed etc from the "Whom it Effects" list. Enter the results of the 'action' into the appropriate fields. Press the "Accept Action" to apply the results.

Skill checks - selecting this action will just show you the skill total they have and a list of d20 rolls they have provided. If you accept the 'action' it will remove one of the d20 rolls. This is how you can do secret rolls using d20 rolls they have previously provided. When you ACCEPT an action, their line in the "Action Initiative Sequence" will go BLUE to signify that they have done an action. It will also tell you which initiative you're up to. Once you have pressed an ACCEPT button, it will apply the results straight away to those effected. The CANCEL button will NOT undo those results !

*** You should always do that "Save All" step before you exit the program **

VCS and other programs are available at : http://www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/Peaks/7843/
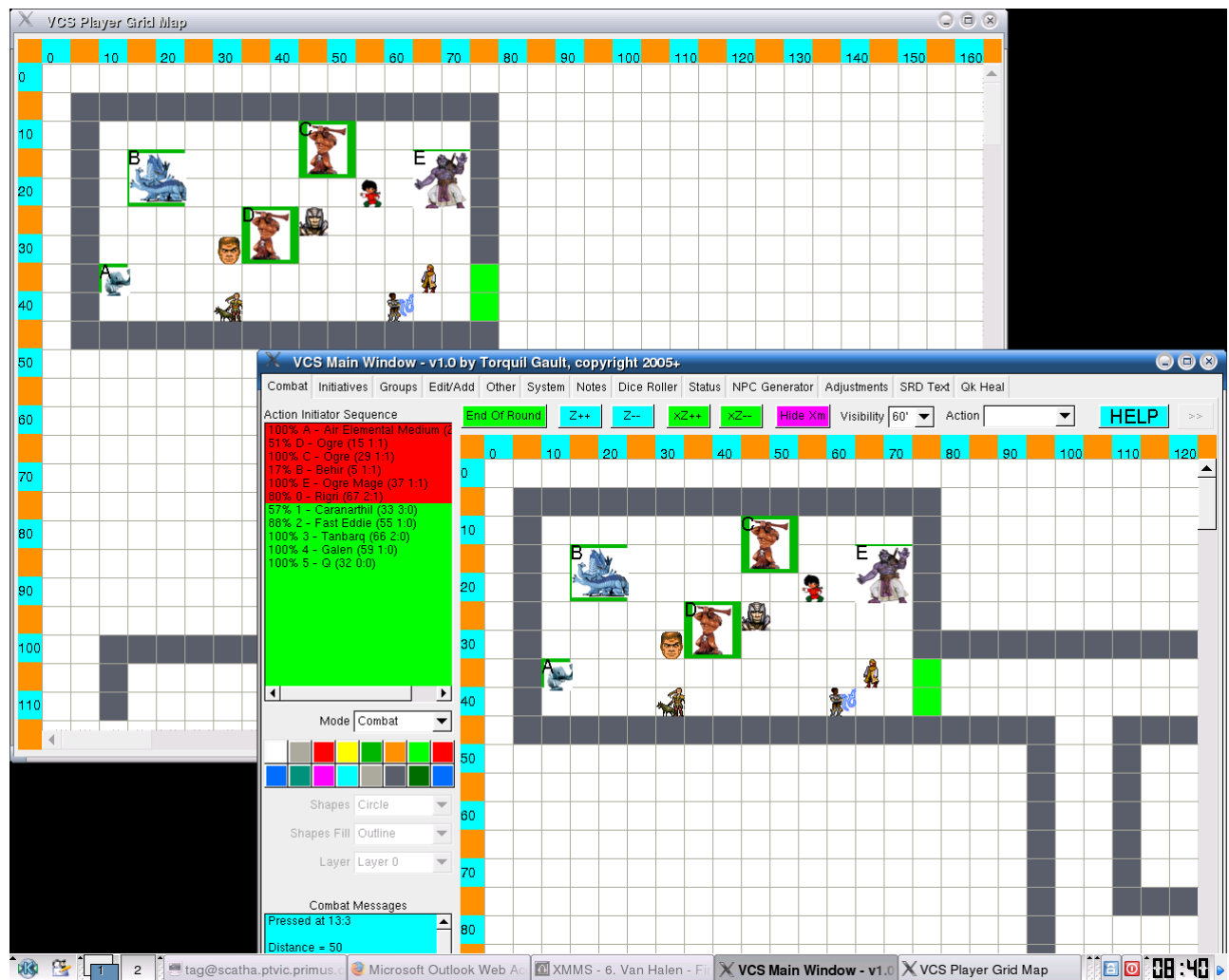
Lord Orcus Listens: A Gaming Advice Column

by Steve Saunders

Happy Hellidays, mortal scum! I'm pressed for time getting things all ready around here for Xmas, so we'll just jump right into the fray… First up are the Xmas Gift requests from you to me. Asking me to do your bidding, eh? Risky. But I admire mortals with a little gumption (read: *a little*). Plus I enjoy playing Santa. Hey, it's for the kids.

They're tasty.

Let's start with some requests from the **Roleplayers Livejournal Community** (http://community.livejournal.com/roleplayers/)…

Captain Jester would like to choose who lives and who dies.
I have already cornered the market on that, mortal. Along with Captain Kirk and Small Pox. Would you care for a blanket as a parting gift?

Lord Tyger asks "I want Wizards to stop being dicks, give Star Wars back to West End Games, and stop whoring out the minis and making them pretty much required. But I doubt even the great Lord Orcus can stop the Demiurge of Greed that runs Wizards."
Tyger, Tyger, Tyger… The hit squad has been called out on you. As a sign that I'm not completely heartless, however, I will allow for you to have a few minutes to make peace with you-- oh, dear. Man, those WotC guys ARE dicks! And ruthlessly messy, too. Say a prayer for Lord Tyger, would ya?

Demonicgerbil requests one million dollars and a fig.
Done. Except the money's in Slovenian Tolars. Enjoy the fig! [EDIT: Hey, Orcus. the current exchange rate is 1 USD = 170 Slovenian Tolars.. That's still almost six thousand US dollars.. Perhaps 1,000,000 Vietnames Dong? That's only $58 USD. One million dong love you long time at that price.]

Axereaver (love the name!) pleads "Is every RPG book ever published in mint condition too much to ask for?"
Yes. Though don't be surprised if a gold-plated copy of The World of Synnibarr is delievered to your home by bio-syntha cyborg ninja reindeer with laser-guided missiles for eyes. 'Tis the season!

Vikingtim says "I want peace on earth through total orcian domination, via superior firepower."
Space Vikings it is! YAAARRRR!!

Finelas retorts to Vikingtim in the same thread "My Dwarven brothers in arms will disagree."
Right. So, Squats for you, then. The bikers are my faves, by the way. And the Squats in power armour. Pure beauty.

Sorry, Finelas, I think I'll keep these for myself. Well, I'm not *really* sorry, but you know what I mean.

Ooo! Look! ZOATS!

Ewoksith caps the joy and giving with "I want my bag of holding and portable hole to stop having three-ways with the Astral Plane."
This one is going to be tough, Ewoksith (another *great* name!)… Bag of Holding can be such a bitch, especially when drunk on Relska vodka. Add to that the promiscuous nature of Portable Hole and you can just check off the massive SAN loss now. There is no harm in trying, though, and no matter what you look like afterwards, my glue-sniffing kobold army is on the case.

So much gift-giving joy! Moving on to answering questions and bestowing madness and presents on folks who didn't talk to me through **Roleplayers**….

This first one is from Steve, who is one of my smelly, pathetic writing slaves in the strip mines:

"Dear Masterfully Efficient Dark Lord,
I was hoping you could bestow upon my mortal world the glory that is a Roman Metal band. They can dress as gladiators and centurions and sing in Latin. And they shall be called SPQR DCLXVI. Please, my black-hearted liege most foul, *please* **make this happen.**
Ever Your Faithful Slave,
Steve"

Oh, yes. I'll get right on it. In the meantime, here's Hinterwelt's Roma Imperious and a copy of the Roma board/card game to keep you entertained, along with your 3 friends. Merry Xmas, pathetic human worm.

Yeah, I wasn't able to completely fulfill that one right away. It happens. I listen, though, and that's what counts. Well, that and eating human flesh.

Here's another sad—er, I mean, nice mortal:

"Dear Lord Orcus,
For Christmas I want a GI Joe, a red firetruck, and a +5 Holy Avenger. My little brother has been bad all year, can you leave the Terrasque in his stocking?
Merry Christmas,
Jimmy"

Hi, Jimmy! Look, you're gonna have to do without the firetruck. But at least you'll have a GI Joe (Footloose and Shipwreck okay?) and I'll even through in a Panthro Thundercat who looks remarkably like Vin Diesel. As for your brother: DONE. After he is consumed and utterly destroyed, I'll see that his soul works the Fall Mart down the street from my domicile.

Here's one from Maxxwell:

"Dear Lord Orcus,
How do I tell some I really don't know to well that they have boogers hanging on their nose? And do you know Rick Astley personally? Or is he just an office buddy?"

Dammit, I just got Rickrolled in my own goddamned column. I'll be seeing you, Maxxwell. Soon.

Yeah, me and Rick go way back. How do you think he ever got started in the Business? It was me, baby. All ME. Well, all me and about 77 dismembered ninjas. The myconid wizards, too. Can't forget about them. For the record, Astley doesn't have an office or even a cubicle. He has a wi-fi equipped wooden crate that I sometimes let him out of. Sometimes.

This one is from young John Wagner, a writer of funny-books and co-creator of the historical fantasy comic **Salvus** with slave-Steve, I'm told:

"Dear Lord Orcus,

If you could ask a random fan just one question, what would it be? Also, what would be his/her answer? And how would you feel about that answer?
Thanks. I kind of love you."

Here's how I see it: … "Hello mortal, what do you taste like?" -- Then the mortal says "Bacon-wrapped Corned Beef!" -- Then I would feel good. *Real good*.

I kind of love you, too, Josh. In gravy.

(Check out Josh's work here: http://www.fictionclemens.com)

Another loyal follower asks:

"Dear Lord Orcus,
How are you able to type with boxing gloves on your hands?
Crapfully yours,
H in SK"

It's tough, H, but eventually I mastered it. The hard part was learning to type with gerbils for eyes. All that… scratching.

Oh, look! Another writer-being…

"Dear Lord Orcus,
Would you tell that wang-dangler Steve Saunders that I'm going to devote my entire next column [at
http://www.comicswaitingroom.com] to an interview with him about his stupid Nazi Ghostbusters comic or
whatever it is? And tell him to get in touch with me, without actually touching me or looking me in the eyes?
I hope you burn,
Brandon Jerwa, esq."

Yes, yes, Brandon. I'm burning quite nicely, thanks! And I'm loving *Battlestar Galactica: Ghosts*; an excellent comic book which I highly recommend! As for Steve, you must mean **The Secret Cross**, which is an upcoming comic about a German outfit during World War One which battled demons, werewolves and other nasties. More information can be found here: http://secretcross.com/blog

After whipping Steve some he says "Yes… just please stop, my Lord!!". Awww, he's so sweet, that kid. Sweet and juicy… like… bacon. Oh, and yes, Sleve-Steve, Stephen Lindsay and Dominic Vivona (the creators of Secret Cross) would indeed like to turn Secret Cross into an RPG at some point. Get those sacrifices ready for the pit, my friends!

And, uh, Brandon… Getting Steve to stop touching people is really, *really* difficult. You may need to taze him. Hundreds of times.

(Make sure to visit Brandon's site hundreds of times! http://brandonjerwa.com/)

Phenomenal artist Jimmy Bott asks the following:

"**Is it true most dedicated RPG players have very little in the way of social skills and worry about the size of their penis?**"

Actually, Jimmy Bott, it's the other way around! Gamers have incredible social skills and use them primarily for evil and devil-worship (thank goodness!). They worry little, if at all, about their penis size because most of them only use their penises to urinate, or they are women and thus have no penis to speak of. These women usually have excellent social skills, too. And weapons. Lots of weapons.

I would like to add that I love your art, Mr. Bott! (http://jimmybott.blogspot.com/)

Stephen Lindsay, creator of **Jesus Hates Zombie**s and who works on **The Secret Cross** with my Slave-Steve had to jump in on the LOL action:

"Dear Lord Orcus,
What is the best way to resolve a parking-lot stand-off, when you and another car both feel you've got 'dibs' on a certain parking spot and are patiently waiting with your turn signal on?"

Chainsaws. Rabid attack badgers can really tip the balance in one's favour, too. So keep those badgers handy. Great question, Steve-L! These sorts of things are incredibly important to know in life (and unlife), and it would be a shame for me not to impart my incredible wisdom on the subject; especially around the holidays!

(Check out what Steve-L is up to here: http://www.captionsandballoons.com/)

Kaeshan, Dread Lord of the Dire Weasels, asks:

"Why is there a 'G' in 'Gnome'?"

Science, Kaeshan… SCIENCE™!!

From the tenaciously neat-o Ryan Huston:

"Orcus, how do you know if you're a lesbian?"

Scien-- ah, wait. I guess you could find out through trial and error. For this specific question, I went to Velia, immortal Etruscan princess, and pal 'o mine. She says "Are they cute? Let me make out with them and we can find out. It's Science™, after all."

I guess Velia is a fan of Science™, too. She really is quite amazing.

Speaking of women, I finally convinced one to write in!

The lovely Juana asks:

"I need a footwear suggestion. What would do more damage against a troll? My Manolo Blahnik peeptoes or my Louboutin patent stilettos? Then, how do you get the blood off them?"

An excellent question! Go with the Louboutins, and make sure they have that special FlameTard® covering so you can douse them in lighter fluid and set them ablaze. It's no good stomping trolls when they can heal up so quick. Fire has a way of solving that dilemma. The blood should be a problem since the fire will burn most of it off… But if you do have some left over, go ahead and use a putty knife and / or a pixie-fairy's face to scrape it. Save in a mason jar for future special blood-pies!

The Manolos are great against any kind of Space Viking threat, as they are naturally terrified of that specific sort of

footwear. I mean, seriously, they'll pee themselves if they even think you may have them on.

Nathanael Cole, the brilliant mind behind the game *Cannibal Contagion*, asks:

"Dear Lord Orcus, how much did you last batch of chin shavings sell for on eBay? And if you haven't tried selling them yet, why the hell not?"

There are contractual reasons why I am unable to sell my chin shavings anywhere, Mr. Cole. Perhaps you could send me seven fresh human hearts to help me change those contracts? Come on, it's the season to give.

(And give Nathanael's site a visit too: http://nathanaelcole.com)

He's a letter I found very, very touching and heart-felt…

"My Daddy smells like the inside of my lunchbox when I leave it at school on Friday and spends all his time with his big-boy friends and my Mommy says 'if he handled me like he handles those goddamn dice maybe you wouldn't look so much like Uncle Mailman', but I don't know what that means but I do know I like Uncle Mailman even though he says my Daddy just plays with games and toys all the time 'like a little bitch,' whatever that means. But I asked Daddy if I could play and he said 'This isn't a GAME, this is LIFE! And stop calling him Uncle Mailman!' So why won't my Daddy let me play with his big-boy game? And is it true there's no Santa Claus like he says?
Stay Orcusy,
Little Qais"

Whoa, whoa, WHOA! Right off the bat, Qais, you need to know that THERE IS A SANTA CLAUS. Why, just the other week we were down in Antananarivo killing hoo—Hoo boy! Look at the time! Moving on!

Qais, you when you're old enough, your Daddy will let you play with his dice a whole bunch. So much, in fact, your Mommy will get quite jealous. As for Uncle Mailman, I hear he punches puppies in the face. He is SO not your friend. Just ask him for the USS Flagg sometime and see what he says. After he says "no" then ask him for at least a Rattler or two. He won't even kick you down a Wild Weasel figure, dude. The guy is a punk. So set him on fire, 'kay?

Now go roll a d12? If you got 1-11 you are screwed and you should take up a life of drinking exotic Welch whisky. If you got a 12 then you are only kinda screwed and only need to drink rum until blind on Tuesdays. Thanks for writing, Little Qais. Happy holidays to you and your pet pirate squid.

Unholy stars and gourmet pickled people's heads, another nice young lady wrote in! This one is from the incredibly awesome and certainly quite evil La Suciedad …

"Oh, Lord Orcus, where do you get your mustard gas?"

Costco. They give me a discount! I love it there. They had a big sale on VX back in October. Sigh… Best. Haunted. House. EVER.

Tobey Cook, master of time and comic book knowledge, asks an important question:

"Who is better… Batman or Wolverine?"

Happy to answer this one, Tobey-- **DARK CLAW**.
Total no-brainer there, folks.

Andrew inquires…

"What does Lord Orcus fear?"

That's an easy one, Andrew: **RUNNING OUT OF BACON**. The fear, it shall consume me if I am not careful. It is a terror that eats at my very soul!

Here's another:

"Dear Lord Orcus,
Is it possible to be halfway between the Astral plane and another plane? If so, would that be called Half-Astral?
Signed,
A Planewalker Wannabee"

Yes indeed, Wannabee, Half-Astral is correct. If both planes are connected, then we call that a Bi-plane.

And that, my friends is the plane truth. For more information involving the all-ages planes of gaming and the various planes of gaming advocacy, allow me to direct you to http://www.theescapist.com .

Last, and possibly least (just kidding!), we have a letter from Lev, our Editor-in-Chief here at **RPG Review**.

"Dear Orcus,
My dearest Christmas wish.... Is to see gay marriage legally recognised.
**Especially between you and Demogorgon."**

Yeah, Lev, that's my wish, too. Luckily I've bribed some actor-worshipping space aliens who have an irrational fear of podiatrists to help out. One day I can hold my Demo in my arms and call him "wife" without any shame.

I would like to thank all of you sniveling humans who have supported **Orcusville.com** over the last year. It's been a fun ride, full of the brutal enslavement of talented people, fighting the good fight against Good and attack-badger training.

(Yes, they are coming for YOU, Ian Sharman! BADGERS!)

During this time of year, be sure to keep your families close… in case you have to eat them. Merry Xmas + d6 Other Holidays and have a Happy New Year full of conquest and Glory!

Off to Eat Some Tasty Nuclear-Enhanced Reindeer!
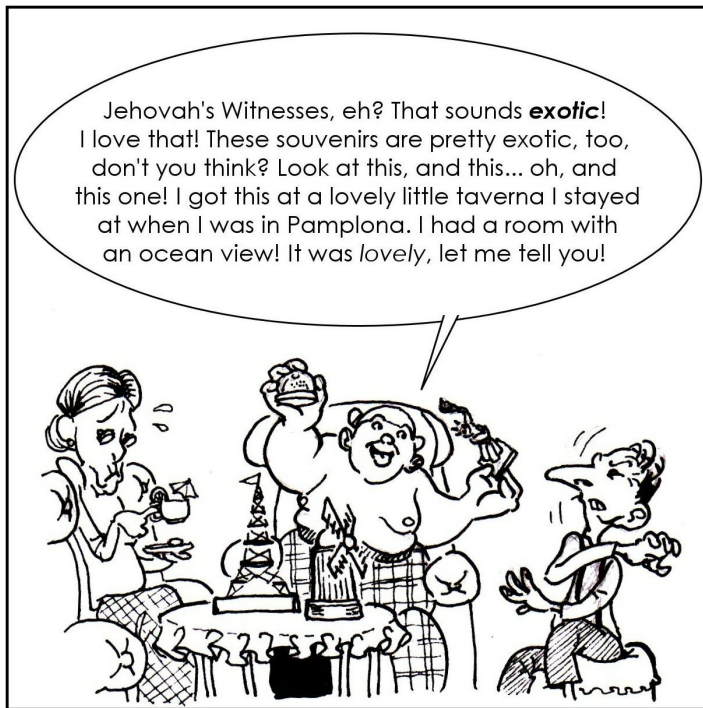
Ahh, such delightful Christmas presents

Gloranthan Sacred Time Song

by Stewart Stansfield

Pucewattle and Snail

J. Gawkip Pucewattle, durulz snailherd, was found drunk one Dark Season in Dragon Pass. He was singing the following song...

"On the tenth day of Sacred Time, Gbaji gave to me...

"Ten Krarshtkids a-crawling,
"Nine Slime Deer a-spewing,
"Eight Bagogi a-stinging,
"Seven Ogres a-eating,
"Six Broo a-shagging..."

"FIIVE WAAALLK-TAAAAH-PIIIIIIIII!

"Four Jack O'bears,
"Three Dragonsnails,
"Two Chaos Goats,
"And a GAAWWWW-AAAWP IN A FIR TREE!"

There are still doubts about that Duck's religious convictions..

Pucewattle and his friends can be found on Stu's 'blog Duxploitation (http://duxploitation.blogspot.com/). Complies with Issaries requirements (http://www.glorantha.com/inc/required_statements.html).

IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF RPG REVIEW

Paranoia ... The Melbaplex ... Houses of the Blooded ... 3:16 Carnage Amongst The Stars ... Hero System ... Young Gods Setting (Spelljammer + Planescape + Superheroes!) ... Dennis Sustare Special ... Bunnies & Burrows ... Swordbearer ... Heroes of Olympus ... Designers Notes for Demon Spirits ... Theory: Diegesis, Metagaming and Anachronisms ... and more!!

Astaroth, Demon of Hell. Sourced from Wikipedia